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Thesis/Project

QUEERING CHURCH:  
INTEGRATING QUEER THEOLOGY IN CONGREGATIONAL LIFE  
IN METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY CHURCHES

BY

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MASTER'S OF DIVINITY, LANCASTER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, 2002

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

2008







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## DEDICATION

This thesis project is dedicated to the gifted and generous members and friends of  
The Metropolitan Community Church of Northern Virginia  
for their unparalleled humor, creativity, and courage,  
and for their willingness to take a chance on a newbie.





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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the persistent love and support of my partner, Kala Payne, who continues to make my heart sing. Her willingness to read drafts of these papers and to endure my anxiety as each deadline approached provided me with the encouragement, wisdom, and comic relief I very much needed. My mother, Wyndy Wyatt, was also an early reader. Her excessive praise of my efforts is deeply rooted in parental bias, but nevertheless tremendously valued.

This thesis project would also not have been possible without the support, flexibility, grace, and financial support of the congregation I am blessed to serve. The members and friends of MCC NOVA were generous in allowing me the time required to complete my coursework and write this thesis. Additionally (and no doubt to their chagrin), they provided me with too many case studies and examples to include. Particular mention is due Gail Minnick for agreeing to be my point of local accountability. Her questions about my work were as challenging as they were aggravating, and they helped me clarify my ideas and better articulate them.

I am grateful to my D. Min. Colloquium for helping me articulate the goals of my thesis from the very beginning of this project, when I only had a vague notion of what I was doing and feared I was in way over my head. I am particularly indebted to The Rev. Drs. Ian Douglas and Joan Martin for their gentle guidance through the challenges of project proposals, thesis outlines, and the logistics of long-distance study. I am grateful to my advisor, The Rev. Dr. William Kondrath, for his patience, keen insights, and commitment to bridge the persistent gap between the academy and the church. I am





grateful to the extraordinary Faculty of EDS, including Professors Kwok Pui Lan, Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook, Larry Wills, Ed Rodman, and Bill Kondrath for their expert tutelage, challenging engagement, and willingness to help me mold the papers for their courses into something that would help shape this project. Aura Fluet and James Gorman provided invaluable writing and research advice.

Along the way, conversations with my friends and colleagues in the field, including (in no particular order) and not limited to, The Revs. Nori Rost, Robert Griffin, Durrell Watkins, Tom Bohache, Joe McMurray, Penny Nixon, Mona West, Robert Goss, Robin Gorsline, Edgard Danielsen-Morales, and BK Hipsher provided essential material for reflection. Thank you for your wisdom and your commitment to queering the church. Finally, I owe so much to The Rev. Elder Nancy Wilson, whose encouragement when I was still a teenager helped me begin discerning a call to the vocation of professional ministry in MCC (which has been one of the greatest blessings of my life); and to The Rev. Elder Jim Mitulski, a true mentor, whose constant support and encouragement during the course of my ministry has meant more to me than I can say.

Final thanks go to Cindy Allan for her superb editing skills and willingness to courageously yield a red pen with a complete lack of fear about damaging my sensitive feelings. Any errors contained herein are solely mine.



## PREFACE

The impetus for this thesis emerged from my desire to answer the question, “If queer theology is worth anything at all, shouldn’t it transform the way we live and function as the church?” My bias, of course, is demonstrated in the phrasing of the question itself. I am convinced that there *are* unique spiritual values and life lessons born of queer experience that have as much liberative potential for our churches as they have had for many of our lives. Queer theology — a liberation theology attentive to the changing dynamics of gender, sexuality, and identity that strives to help people find authenticity, vitality, and wholeness in body, mind, and spirit — cannot simply be a nice theory put on a shelf or discussed in sterile academic settings. Rather, it has much broader and more urgently needed implications; we must find ways to integrate it and allow it to critique and shape our praxis. I am deeply troubled when Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) congregations (who should know better!) uncritically replicate the systems of ideological, theological, or structural exclusion from which they themselves sought refuge and liberation. I want to answer this question because I feel called to help congregations do this work, and because I sense that my own faith in the usefulness of “church” altogether depends on it.

This project will not serve as a theological argument for the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in the church, though it assumes this as a legitimate and sacred goal. Neither will it contain or function as a study of homosexuality and the Bible; plenty has been written about that. While the work presented here may have implications for church contexts other than MCC, it is thoroughly rooted in the experience and reality of MCC congregations as I have known





them. Likewise, while it may have applications in other cultural contexts, it is limited in its focus on dominant Western culture as observable in the contemporary United States. Finally and regrettably, due to the constraints of time and maximum page limitations, the project will not include a practical step-by-step guide or a proposal for a full congregational life curriculum. It attempts to join an emerging conversation, the insights of which must continue to be practically developed and applied. However, given those limitations, I do hope that this work is faithful to the challenging reality of the tension-filled, sacred, marginal, and erogenous zones of queer church experience.



## INTRODUCTION

According to the Vision Statement of Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC), we “are on a bold mission to transform hearts, lives, and history. We are a movement that faithfully proclaims God’s inclusive love for all people and proudly bears witness to the holy integration of spirituality and sexuality.”<sup>1</sup> This is an unapologetically ambitious, optimistic, and forward-looking statement, which does seem to capture the heart of what MCC congregations want to be about in the world. Because we live in a world in which inclusive love has never been normative, as well as in a church and world in which the *dis*-integration of spirituality and sexuality has been rigorously enforced, living into this idealistic and courageous vision will require us to be continuously countercultural in our approach to being “church.” Among other things, this will require MCC congregations to move beyond the uncritical adoption of theologies, liturgies, and normative structures of dominant hetero-patriarchal Christian denominations invested in the status quo.

One important resource for this work can be found in the emerging field of queer theology, which is shaped by the experiences of liberation and spiritual transformation of those who have been marginalized due to their sexuality and/or gender. I believe queer theology, if it can successfully be integrated with congregational praxis, holds as much potential to liberate our churches as it has liberated many LGBT people. In this thesis, I

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<sup>1</sup> Metropolitan Community Churches, <http://www.mccchurch.net> (accessed November 10, 2007).





hope to help pastors and leaders<sup>2</sup> understand queer theology so that they may use it as a tool for analysis and reflection, and intentionally plan its integration in daily congregational life.

To that end, I will begin with a task I wish were unnecessary — that of defining the word “queer.” Because queer is still a contentious word for many of our congregations as a whole, and for many individuals even within congregations that have managed to redeem the word and make it normative, I will spend time in Chapter 1 charting the evolution of the word *queer*, explaining some of the potential benefits of applying queer theory, and being as clear as possible about how I will use the word throughout this project. In Chapter 2, I will explore the emerging field of queer theology, including the attempt to describe some core values and strategies it employs. In Chapter 3, I will make a case for the need to integrate queer theology in congregational life, including noting some troublesome examples when this integration has not been the case. Finally, in chapter 4, I will take a focused look at the question of leading congregational change, since I understand this to be one of the primary areas requiring the attention of pastors and leaders in MCC.

My original hope when planning this project was that I could go far enough to suggest how queer theology might affect everything from how we read, preach, and teach scripture to how we run board meetings and prepare budgets. That goal was overly ambitious, as I confess I am wont to be. My revised goal is simply to make a

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<sup>2</sup> I will use “pastors” and “leaders” interchangeably in this work because I want to acknowledge that while this is an essential calling of pastors, this is not a question or concern limited to the ordained professional clergy. Although pastors are often given responsibility for the types of issues we will discuss, lay leaders are as important and integral to the success of this process in congregations.



contribution to the conversation taking place in MCC about how we can practically recognize and draw upon our unique perspectives and strengths, of which I believe queer theology to be a primary tool, in order to live faithfully into our vision. I hope this may also serve as a resource for bridging the gap between the clergy and the laity, between the jargon of the academy and the language on the streets/in the pews, between erudite talking heads and passionate working hearts. These false dichotomies exist both within and between us, and it is only by transcending them that we can do this work.



## CHAPTER 1

### QUEER: DEFINING THE INDEFINABLE

It is important to begin with the acknowledgement that a significant learning curve exists between the individual members and leaders of local MCC congregations and the emerging conversations about queer theology among academicians, theologians, theorists, and practitioners. Before we can move the conversations beyond the hallowed halls of seminaries or the pristine pages of professional journals in order for it to have practical impact on the day-to-day life of congregations, we must define core terms and concepts so that we can establish a common vocabulary for this broader dialogue. For better or worse, the first place we have to start is with the word *queer*.

In contemporary discussions of sexuality, the word *queer* has a variety of definitions and usages: from pejorative slurs against sexual/gender minorities to an umbrella term for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) persons to the descriptor of a particular intellectual theory. Even in MCC congregations, whose members are primarily (though not exclusively) lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or otherwise queer-identified persons, use of the word *queer* is contentious. Not all people share the same understanding of its meaning; use of the word triggers various emotional responses; and there is hardly a unanimous embrace of the term as an adequate descriptor of LGBT people or our churches. Therefore, in order to mine the potential of queer theology, it is necessary to carefully define the word *queer* in order to remove obstacles and advance the conversation. In this chapter, I will outline the variable definitions and usages of *queer*, as well as survey the historical contexts that shaped them. I will





conclude by specifying the ways in which I will personally use the word throughout this project.

## The Evolution of a Word

### Reclaiming a Word with Rotten Roots

The word *queer*, as it relates to contemporary discussions of sexuality, is rooted in its usage as a pejorative slur referring to particular individuals who did not conform to societal sex/gender norms. There is some evidence that the word *queer*, traditionally referring to that which “differed in some way from what is usual or normal,”<sup>3</sup> was used by some homosexual men in the 1910’s and 1920’s to describe themselves. George Chauncey observed that in pre-World War II New York, men whose sexual interests differentiated them from other men would usually call themselves queer.<sup>4</sup> However, by far the most prominent early usage of the word to refer to those with same-sex attractions or non-normative expressions of gender was as a derogatory epithet hurled by others, not as a self-proclaimed identity. The *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* indicates that in twentieth-century America, “queer has probably been the most popular vernacular term

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<sup>3</sup> Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, <http://m-w.com> (accessed February 2, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890 - 1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 101. It is worthy of note that the source of this differentiation was generally not the biological sex of their sexual partners, but rather the gender role they assumed in those relationships (i.e., a “feminine” gender presentation). For a fuller explanation, see George Chauncey, “Christian Brotherhood or Sexual Perversion? Homosexual Identities and the Construction of Sexual Boundaries in the World War I Era,” in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey Jr. (New York: NAL Books, 1989), 297.



of abuse for homosexuals.”<sup>5</sup> This harmful use of the word *queer* is still felt by a number of people today. Judith Butler, one of the pioneers of the contemporary queer theory/studies movement, describes her own experience of the word’s harmful origins:

Consider the word *queer*, which thirty years ago (even twenty, even fifteen ago) was considered profoundly derogatory and frightening as a speech act. I remember living in an era of great fear of the word, knowing I was eligible for it, thinking that once it actually landed on me I would be branded forever and that the stigma would do me in completely.<sup>6</sup>

Butler’s experience is hardly isolated or unique. Those whose minds and bodies bear the memory of “queer” being used against them or those they love to stigmatize and harm are very vocal in expressing their dislike of the word still today. In my work as the pastor of a predominantly LGBT congregation, for example, I have had many conversations with people who resist the use of this word. In 2005, my congregation conducted some strategic visioning work as we explored again questions about our unique identity, character, and calling as a community. Following this work, they voted overwhelmingly to modify our mission statement, in part, by replacing the words “lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people as well as our families, friends, and allies” with the words “queer and queer-friendly people.” The dialogue about this was extensive, and a few members of the community (primarily individuals of fifty years of age or older) agreed to the change only reluctantly, expressing the pain they still felt was associated with *queer*. It is

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<sup>5</sup> *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality*, ed. Wayne R. Dynes (Garland, NY: Taylor & Francis, 1990), 1091.

<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler, “Changing the Subject: Judith Butler’s Politics of Radical Resignification,” interview with Gary A. Olson and Lynn Worsham, in *The Judith Butler Reader*, ed. Sara Salih with Judith Butler (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 351. (Italics in original.)





also worth noting that, at the time, some enlightened straight-identified members of the community were also hesitant to use the word, not wanting to participate in harmful speech.

However, many others have sought to “reclaim” the word from its derogatory roots and use it for personal empowerment.<sup>7</sup> Butler herself went through such a transformation of thought regarding the word *queer*:

Ten or twelve years ago when *queer* started to happen as a term, people would ask, “What do you think, should we produce a journal called *Queer Theory*?” I thought, “My God, do we have to use that word?” I was still in its grip. I was still thinking, “Must we take on this word? Isn’t it too injurious? Why do we need to repeat it at all?” I still think that there are words that are in fact so injurious that it’s very hard to imagine that they could be repeated in a productive way; however, I did note that using the word *queer* again and again as part of an affirmative practice in certain contexts helped take it out of an established context of being exclusively injurious, and it became about reclaiming language, about a certain type of courage, about a certain kind of opening up of the term, about the possibility of transforming stigmatization into something more celebratory.<sup>8</sup>

The attempt to reclaim the word *queer* as a value-positive and empowering word is a task held in common by all of the definitions and uses of the term included here. However, it is important to explicitly maintain the memory of the earlier and defamatory uses of the word. This history not only matters to those who continue to bear wounds associated with it, but it is also integral to the continued evolution of the word as well as the individuals, ideas, and interests it represents.

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<sup>7</sup> Judy Grahn, *Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay Worlds* (Updated and Expanded; Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 90. Grahn's work attempts to reclaim a number of gay and lesbian epithets in a comparative cultural study. On the topic of reclaiming epithets as words of empowerment, see also Julia Penelope, *Call Me Lesbian: Lesbian Lives, Lesbian Theory* (Freedom, California: Crossing Press, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> Butler, “Changing the Subject,” 351. (Italics in original.)





## An Expanding Umbrella

A popular, yet somewhat controversial, use of the word *queer* is “as an umbrella term for a number of dissimilar subjects, whose collectivity is underwritten by mutual engagement in non-normative sexual practices or identities.”<sup>9</sup> Queer in this sense may be used to refer to gays and lesbians as well as bisexual and transgender persons. For some, this makes queer a “coalition word” that brings these diverse people together, usually for the purposes of political solidarity and action.<sup>10</sup> As the need for political coalitions has grown in recent decades, the specific categories of “identity” included in the term queer have likewise expanded.<sup>11</sup>

While this use of the word *queer* is favored by many who find it less cumbersome than an ever-expanding acronym (i.e., LGBTIQA<sup>12</sup>) or series of sexual/gender identities, it is critiqued by those who claim it blurs necessary distinctions that exist among and between these disparate groups. For example, David Phillips argues that

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<sup>9</sup> Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 111-112.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Goss, *Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 39. At the time this book was published, the author referred only to gays and lesbians, not bisexual or transgender individuals. In more recent works, Goss explicitly includes these categories of people. This is indicative of the expanding nature of the term queer, which directly follows the expansion of the articulated categories of sexual and gender differentiation that have generally come to be included in the gay and lesbian liberation movement.

<sup>11</sup> It should be explicitly noted, however, that it has never expanded quite enough to be truly inclusive. Even as various groups are added, there always exist others who are not mentioned and whose particular interests are not included.

<sup>12</sup> This partial list generally refers to lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender and intersex persons, along with those who are either questioning (yet to claim a sexual orientation or identity) or queer (in the sense I will later define of transgressing all of these categories), as well as allies in the liberation movement.



the inclusionist ambitions of queer — the attempt to represent not only gays and lesbians, transgenderists, and even heterosexuals as ‘straight identified queers’, *et cetera* — has had the effect of not only effacing the specific political identities, needs and agendas of these various groups but that, in doing so, queer has produced a new closet as any specific self-identification as either gay or lesbian (predicated upon same-sex practices) is disavowed.<sup>13</sup>

Lesbian feminists also raise a particular critique that this umbrella use of the term queer, as the similar and earlier use of the term “gay” to refer to both homosexual men and women, threatens to silence the specific voice and concerns of women. For example, in Adrienne Rich’s widely quoted essay, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” she claims that because lesbianism can be best understood in terms of categories of gender, lesbians are necessarily distanced from full affiliation with gay men:

Lesbians have historically been deprived of a political existence through “inclusion” as female versions of male homosexuality. To equate lesbian existence with male homosexuality because each is stigmatized is to erase female reality once again. ... But there are differences: women’s lack of economic and cultural privilege relative to men; qualitative differences in female and male relationships — for example, the patterns of anonymous sex among male homosexuals, and the pronounced ageism in male homosexual standards of sexual attractiveness. I perceive the lesbian experience as being, like motherhood, a profoundly *female* experience, with particular oppressions, meanings, and potentialities we cannot comprehend as long as we simply bracket it with other sexually stigmatized existences.<sup>14</sup>

While Rich’s critique predates the contemporary debate about the word “queer,” it certainly remains germane to these discussions. I include it here because it strikes at the

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<sup>13</sup> David Phillips (1994), “What’s So Queer Here? Photography at the Gay and Lesbian Marti Gras,” *Eyeline* 26, pp. 16-19, as quoted in Jagose, 112.

<sup>14</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5 (summer 1980). (Italics in original.)





heart of the feminist critique about the assumption of “lesbian” into any broader category, especially those including men, which has remained a largely consistent argument.

Similar arguments are occasionally raised by bisexuals, as well as transgender persons. However, in the latter case, there appears to be much more willingness to notice the complex relationships between sex and gender that label all of us queer if we transgress sex/gender norms in any way. For example, transgender activist Leslie Feinberg argues that “while the lesbian, gay, bi, and trans populations do not experience identical oppressions, or voice the same grievances or demands, in the current-day United States, our communities have been strengthened by forming coalitions ....”<sup>15</sup>

In spite of the critique offered by feminists and others, the word *queer* is gaining prominence in its popular usage as just such an umbrella term. It is also worthy of note that this usage often occurs quite apart from academic discourse about queer theory, to which I will soon turn. Suffice it to say at this juncture that this popular use of the word *queer* as an umbrella term does not *necessarily* include those whose expression of gender and/or sexuality might be considered “non-normative sexualities,” such as sado-masochism, pornography, butch/fem, certain trans- practices, prostitution, polyamory, or intergenerational sex.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 98.

<sup>16</sup> Jagose, 64. (Emphasis mine.) In practice, many people who are open about sexual practices like these are often explicitly or implicitly shunned or excluded from queer-identified communities. Often, this is motivated by religiously-based judgmentalism, and/or an unwillingness to enter deeply into complex discussions about sexual ethics, which includes questioning the automatic assumptions about what is or is not ethical as determined by the dominant and dominating forces of hetero-patriarchal normativity.





## The Liberation Movements

No discussion about the contemporary definition or use of the word *queer* is complete without at least a brief historical survey of gay and lesbian liberation movements in the past several decades. As impossible as it is to completely describe something as nebulous as the evolution of these movements, they are the direct precursors to modern academic gender/queer theories, as well as major influences on the present-day political and ecclesial context.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, they constitute a necessary knowledge base for full engagement of the *queer* question.

We might begin by acknowledging that current conversations about sexuality and gender, in general, and homosexuality, in particular, are a relatively recent phenomenon. So, while many scholars of diverse disciplines have theorized about the existence of same-sex behavior in all periods of history, efforts to recapture a “gay past” are, at best, problematic.<sup>18</sup> However, once “homosexual” crystallized as an “identity” (i.e., when one could conceive of actually *being* a homosexual instead of simply participating in same-

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<sup>17</sup> I refer here primarily to the United States, though some parallels may exist particularly in other countries heavily influenced by Western thought and tradition. While there is great need to address these questions in other world contexts, it is beyond the scope of my current inquiry. Excellent work is being done, however, by a number of scholars, including these recently consulted works: Rose Wu, *Seeking An Alternative Interpretation of Theology and Ministry with Sexual Minorities in Hong Kong: A Prophetic Vision of a Liberating and Inclusive Christian Community*, (D.Min. Thesis, Episcopal Divinity School, 1988), as well as a number of articles in *A Queer World: The Center for Gay and Lesbian Studies Reader*, ed. Martin Duberman (New York: New York University Press, 1997) and *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay & Lesbian Past*.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Padgug, “Sexual Matters: Rethinking Sexuality in History,” in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, 54-64. Padgug argues against scholars like John Boswell, who attempt to retroject a sense of homosexual or gay identity into historical contexts that had no such concepts. This raises what is still an important distinction between sexual or gendered *behavior* and the question of whether or not any sort of fixed *identity* flows from that behavior.



sex acts), religious and legal persecution against homosexuals began to increase.<sup>19</sup>

Consequently, there quickly emerged a reactive movement that sought to recognize homosexuality as a natural human phenomenon.<sup>20</sup> Prior to this time, medical and scientific communities directed the primary discourse about homosexuality, usually by pathologizing it and treating it as a disorder.

### *Homophile Movement*

Homophile<sup>21</sup> organizations began to emerge as an organized protest of this anti-homosexual persecution and institutionalized prejudice. The first such organization, the Scientific Humanitarian Committee, was founded in 1897 by German neurologist Magnus Hirschfeld. The primary aim of this group was to affect legislative change by altering the penal code. Hirschfeld argued that because homosexuality was both congenital and harmless, its criminalization caused the needless suffering of homosexuals.<sup>22</sup>

The earliest recorded homophile organization in the United States, the Chicago Society for Human Rights, had similar goals. The 1924 charter outlined a desire to

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<sup>19</sup> Jagose, 23.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>21</sup> The use of the word homophile was intended to (a) move away from an exclusive focus on “sex” and (b) avoid association with the medical diagnosis of homosexuality as a disorder.

<sup>22</sup> John Lauritsen and David Thorstad, *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement, 1864-1935* (Rev. Edition; Ojai, California: Times Change Press, 1995). As quoted in Jagose, 23.





“promote and protect the interests” of homosexuals.<sup>23</sup> Much more significant were later homophile organizations like the Mattachine Society (for men) and the Daughters of Bilitis (for women), founded in 1951 and 1955, respectively.<sup>24</sup> Both organizations sought equal rights by mobilizing their constituencies through a process of “fostering collective identity among homosexuals,” including community education and support aimed at asserting the normality of same-sex attraction.<sup>25</sup> Both organizations tended to distance themselves from persons whose behavior or identity threatened to compromise their ability to assimilate.<sup>26</sup> Both organizations ultimately struggled to maintain an active membership, though their work was foundational for the next evolution in the liberation movements.

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<sup>23</sup> Jagose, 24. It is worthy of mention that one of the strategies employed by this organization was to admit that homosexuals have “mental and psychic abnormalities.” This demonstrates the nascent beginnings of a movement still dominated by the projections placed upon it by the medical/scientific community. While it is easy and tempting to critique this approach from a modern or postmodern perspective, this may illustrate a quite natural evolutionary progression in the gay liberation movement.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 24-27. This assimilationist/accommodationist strategy was predicated on the argument that homosexuals are “just like everyone else” and therefore, deserve the same rights afforded to others. While there are many legitimate present-day critiques of this strategy, it is arguably a politically efficacious one. In fact, the same strategy is still being employed by those who advocate for same-sex marriage rights today. I recently participated in a “Lobby Day” for Equality at the Virginia legislature. Much of the printed material and public statements of contemporary LGBT activists (I use LGBT — not queer — intentionally because it most accurately describes the character, interests, and strategy of these activists, in my experience) is remarkably similar to the promotional literature of these early homophile organizations. The continuity of current same-sex marriage advocates with these early groups (to which I will later return) might also be evidenced by the fact Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin, founders of the Daughters of Bilitis, were the first same-sex couple in the United States to have their marriage recognized by a government entity in 2004.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 24-27. This included anyone who transgressed notions of gender propriety, such as drag queens or butch women. In the case of the Daughters of Bilitis, this was also true of “working class dykes” whose sense of community often centered on the bar scene.





It is generally agreed that a new era in gay liberation was initiated in June of 1969. When police raided the Stone Wall Inn, a New York gay and drag bar, patrons resisted arrest. Consequently, several days of public riots ensued. Thus,

Stonewall functions in a symbolic register as a convenient if somewhat spurious marker of an important cultural shift away from assimilationist politics and quietist tactics, a significant if mythological date for the origins of the gay liberation movement.<sup>27</sup>

While there were other events that previewed this shift, the Stonewall Riot was uniquely able to inspire a nationwide grass-roots movement. Drawing on the success of other such militant movements (e.g., black militants as well as new left, antiwar, and student movements), gays entered a period characterized by “coming out” as an in-your-face political strategy.<sup>28</sup>

Gay liberationists were no longer content to work for tolerance and acceptance; instead, they sought to challenge conventional knowledge about sex, gender, monogamy, and the sanctity of the law.<sup>29</sup> Many liberationists took great pride in scandalizing society with the difference their “gay identity” signaled, eschewing any attempts to gain legitimacy through claims of sameness.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>28</sup> John D'Emilio, “Gay Politics and Community in San Francisco Since World War II,” in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York: NAL Books, 1989), 466. See also Denis Altman, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* (New introduction by Jeffrey Weeks; New York: New York University Press, 1993).

<sup>29</sup> Jagose, 31.



A gay identity was a revolutionary identity: what it sought was not social recognition but to overthrow the social institutions that pathologized homosexuality. In so far as homosexuality did not conform to normative understandings of sex and gender, in liberationist discourse it was often represented as heralding the subversion of those categories, and enabling a new and unmediated sexuality for all people.<sup>30</sup>

### *Lesbian Feminism*

While small numbers of women were always present in the early homophile and gay liberation movements, others believed these movements were insensitive to the unique role gender played in their work and political advocacy. As Jeffrey Weeks asserts,

Lesbians and gays are not two genders within one sexual category. They have different histories, which are differentiated because of the complex organization of male and female identities, precisely along the lines of gender.<sup>31</sup>

As an alternative to what they considered the androcentric nature of the gay liberation movement, some women found the burgeoning women's movement a more suitable venue for their activism and advocacy. However, the women's movement was often intolerant of the specific concerns of lesbians. For example, the largest and most influential women's liberation group in the United States (i.e., the National Organization for Women) often expected those lesbians who were involved in the organization to keep their sexuality secretive since it was potentially damaging.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>31</sup> Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents: Meanings, Myths, & Modern Sexualities* (Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 1985), 203.

<sup>32</sup> Jagose, 46.





The lesbian feminist movement was born at the intersection of competing -isms, namely, the sexism lesbians observed in the gay liberation movement and the heterosexism they found in the women's liberation movement. By no means united about their direction, or even the question of what constitutes a "lesbian identity," lesbians began to assert their ability and responsibility to self-determination in these matters.<sup>33</sup> Several lesbian feminist organizations were formed as a result, including the Radicalesbians in New York, the Furies Collective in Washington, D.C., and Gay Women's Liberation in San Francisco.<sup>34</sup>

Adrienne Rich's previously cited essay on "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980) was a seminal work for lesbian feminism. She argued that because of the complex and insidious nature of sexism, gender must be the "primary identification category" for lesbians instead of sexuality. Rich later amends this view in a footnote added to the essay in 1986, in which she states, "I now think we have much to learn from both the uniquely female aspects of lesbian experience and from the complex 'gay' identity we share with gay men."<sup>35</sup>

Not all lesbian feminists experienced the same evolution in thought. In fact, there remain a number of lesbian feminists who argue that affinity between lesbians and gay males is an impossibility, precisely because gay males are complicit in maintaining structures of male domination.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps the most vehement advocate of this position is

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<sup>33</sup> D'Emilio, 466-67.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 467.

<sup>35</sup> As quoted in Jagose, 50.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*





Sheila Jeffreys, who argues passionately and often that gay men, even more so than straight men, epitomize patriarchal values and male supremacy.<sup>37</sup> This point of view grows out of the early separatist agenda of certain lesbian feminists and takes it to a whole new level.

### *The Impact of AIDS*

The emergence of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s impacted the liberation movements considerably. Due to many factors, not the least of which was the persistent misrecognition of AIDS as a “gay disease” in the public sphere, anti-gay and homophobic forces were emboldened.<sup>38</sup> The few newly acquired citizenship rights that the liberation movements had managed to secure for gays and lesbians were under fierce attack. Additionally, the incredibly devastating impact that the HIV/AIDS crisis had on the homosexual communities, particularly in urban areas, led to new alliances between gay men and lesbians as well as new partnerships between (some) government agencies and gay and lesbian communities.<sup>39</sup>

One noticeable contribution that AIDS made to discussions about sexuality and gender in general was the need to be publicly explicit. In other words, as Lauren Berlant

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<sup>37</sup> Sheila Jeffreys, *The Lesbian Heresy: a Feminist Perspective on the Lesbian Sexual Revolution* (Melbourne, Australia: Spinifex, 1993).

<sup>38</sup> Jagose, 94.

<sup>39</sup> Barry D. Adam, “From Liberation to Transgression and Beyond: Gay, Lesbian and Queer Studies at the Turn of the Century,” in *Handbook of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE, 2002), 17.



and Michael Warner observe, AIDS forced discourse about sexuality itself out of the closet.

AIDS ... forced the issue of translating queerness into the national scene. AIDS made those of us who confronted it realize the deadly stakes of discourse; it made us realize the public and private unvoiceability of so much that mattered, about anger, mourning, and desire; and it made us realize that different frames of reference — science, news, religion, ordinary homophobia — compete and that their disjunction is lethal .... AIDS taught us the need to be disconcertingly explicit about such things as money and sexual practices, for as long as euphemism and indirection produce harm and privilege.<sup>40</sup>

### *Shifting Political Strategies*

The last two decades of the twentieth century included at least two simultaneous and contradictory trajectories of the liberation movements. On the one hand was the direct descendant of Stonewall style gay liberation, perhaps best epitomized in the radical confrontationist strategy of certain AIDS activists. The optimum and earliest example of this was the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), formed in 1987 by those who were outraged at the United States government's mismanagement of the AIDS crisis.<sup>41</sup> ACT UP aimed to help people harness their anger at their own oppression and funnel it into a practice of solidarity for social change.<sup>42</sup> The result was a series of angry, vocal protests of governmental, religious, and public leaders and institutions deemed complicit

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<sup>40</sup> Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "What Does Queer Theory Teach Us About X?," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America (PMLA)* 110, no. 3 (May 1995): 345.

<sup>41</sup> "ACT UP Capsule History," <http://www.actupny.org/documents/capsule-home.html> (accessed February 11, 2006).

<sup>42</sup> Goss, *Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto*, 56.



in the growing AIDS crisis.<sup>43</sup> This urgent political strategy was also embraced by groups like Queer Nation, formed in 1990 by members of ACT UP who were victims of anti-gay violence. Queer Nation's popular protest slogan "We're here, we're queer, get used to it!" illustrates the group's desire to reclaim the word *queer* as a value-positive term as well as their unapologetic approach of rowdy sexual openness and radical confrontation.<sup>44</sup>

On the other hand was a retreat to strategies similar to earlier homophile movements by moving away from militant confrontation and radicalism.<sup>45</sup> In direct opposition to the politics of groups like ACT UP and Queer Nation, these reformist movements sought a quieter and gentler approach to influencing social change. Realizing that "the political strategies that proved most viable in liberal, democratic societies were typically civil rights arguments reliant on judicial and legislative reform," this brand of gay and lesbian politics became "more domesticated" and "mature" and relied on homosexuality being constructed as a minority category parallel to ethnic minorities.<sup>46</sup> Groups such as the Human Rights Campaign<sup>47</sup> and the National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce<sup>48</sup> are perhaps the best examples of this trajectory in the liberation movements.

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<sup>43</sup> The popular protest chant, "ACT UP, FIGHT BACK, FIGHTS AIDS," sums up the general sentiments of the group as well as their style of engagement.

<sup>44</sup> Susan Stryker, "Queer Nation," December 2004, *gltq: An Encyclopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Culture*, [http://www.gltq.com/social-sciences/queer\\_nation.html](http://www.gltq.com/social-sciences/queer_nation.html) (accessed February 11, 2006).

<sup>45</sup> Adam, 16.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>47</sup> Human Rights Campaign Official Website, <http://hrc.org> (accessed February 11, 2006).

<sup>48</sup> National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce Official Website, <http://thetaskforce.org> (accessed February 11, 2006).





## The Contribution of Queer Theory

Alongside — yet often quite disconnected from — the evolution of the political aspirations and strategies of the various liberation movements, a significant discussion about sexuality and gender took place inside the academy. Gay and lesbian studies emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as a distinct field of intellectual inquiry and research, which was characterized initially by a flurry of excited interest in recovering a lost “history.”<sup>49</sup> This research was largely predicated upon the essentialist assumption that there was a discoverable homosexual throughout history and around the world.<sup>50</sup> Very quickly, the limits and shortcomings of this essentialism became clear. Other social constructionist scholars, building on the seminal work of Michel Foucault,<sup>51</sup> observed that while same-sex expressions of desire may be seen throughout history, they vary widely depending on their social and historical contexts and cannot be considered synonymous with the modern sense of homosexuality as an identity.<sup>52</sup> In the words of Laurel Schneider,

The question is not whether sexual love between same-sex partners has occurred throughout history (because it surely has) but whether sexual desire, love, and activity alone constitute a sexual identity.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Adam, 17.

<sup>50</sup> Perhaps the most well known historian to adopt this approach is John Boswell.

<sup>51</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (1st American Ed.; New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

<sup>52</sup> Weeks, 203.

<sup>53</sup> Laurel Schneider, “Queer Theory,” in *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation*, ed. A. K. A. Adam (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2000), 208.



These debates about the existence, viability, and efficacy of any essential “identity” began to dominate academic discourse. Queer theory is the latest development in this discussion.

Queer theory, as a distinct discipline, was set in motion in 1990 by the pioneering work of Judith Butler.<sup>54</sup> Relying heavily on the theories of Foucault, Butler demonstrates the ways in which marginalized identities are complicit with the very regimes they seek to critique and counter (i.e., patriarchy and heterosexism).<sup>55</sup> Specifically, she claims that feminism works against its own explicit goals if it accepts the category “woman” as its foundational grouping. She writes:

The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become “intelligible” requires that certain kinds of “identities” cannot “exist” — that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not “follow” from either sex or gender.<sup>56</sup>

Butler’s critique of gender as “a regulatory construct that privileges heterosexuality” not only presents a challenge to feminism, but also to any other liberation movement that relies on claims of an essential or unified gender/sexual identity in need of liberation.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, whereas both the lesbian and gay liberation movements “were committed fundamentally to the notion of identity politics in assuming identity as the necessary

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<sup>54</sup> Adam, 18.

<sup>55</sup> Jagose, 83.

<sup>56</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 17.

<sup>57</sup> Jagose, 83.



prerequisite for effective political intervention,” queer theory deconstructs and exposes as fictitious any such categories of identification.<sup>58</sup>

The word *queer*, as it is used in queer theory, is a term that ultimately resists all attempts at its own definition. Berlant and Warner offer what they call a “kind of anti-encyclopedia entry” for the word: “*queer* theory is not the theory *of* anything in particular and has no precise bibliographic shape.”<sup>59</sup> Even so, certain things can be said about queer theory. In addition to noting that a constant feature of queer theory is its critique of identity politics, Laurel Schneider observes, “Queer theory is not just for or about so-called homosexuals. It is critical theory concerned principally with cultural deployments of power through social constructions of sexuality and gender.”<sup>60</sup> Obviously, the roots of this concern are evident in queer’s historical evolution from gay and lesbian liberation as well as in feminist studies, which are likewise concerned precisely with this critique of “normative” sex/gender constructs. Queer theory comes into its own and becomes most useful, however, when its hermeneutic is applied to subjects, expressions, and cultures that are presumed to be general or natural, but are, in fact, riddled with the assumptions of heteropatriarchal normativity. For example, using the term “queer commentary” to refer to a body of literary work that applies the hermeneutic of queer theory, Berlant and Warner write:

We can say that queer commentary has been animated by a sense of belonging to a discourse world that only partly exists yet. This work aspires to create publics, publics that can afford sex and intimacy in sustained, unchastening ways; publics

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>59</sup> Berlant and Warner, 344.

<sup>60</sup> Schneider, 206.





that can comprehend their own differences of privilege and struggle; publics whose abstract spaces can also be lived in, remembered, hoped for. By *publics* we do not mean populations of self-identified queers. Nor is the name *queer* an umbrella term for gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and the transgendered. Queer publics make available different understandings of membership at different times, and membership in them is more a matter of aspiration than it is the expression of an identity or a history. Through a wide range of mongrelized genres and media, queer commentary allows a lot of unpredictability in the culture it brings into being.<sup>61</sup>

As soon as one attempts to define queer, then, its definition becomes unstable.

Unwilling to be domesticated, queer is a transgressive term always pushing the margins, always rendering any essential categories of identity ambiguous, always seeking to “address the full range of power-ridden normativities of sex.”<sup>62</sup> Queer is a versatile word used alternately as an adjective to describe certain theories and strategies, as a noun to represent a certain body of work or even certain boundary-blurring people/publics, and as a verb to describe the intent to “mess with” and deconstruct any normative understandings of sexuality, gender, and relationship that claim to be self-evident or natural.

It should be explicitly noted that the queer project’s critique of identity politics has a sharp edge for many who are invested in contemporary gay and lesbian liberation movements. Specifically, queer calls into question the creation of any new norms that would legitimate persons with same-sex attractions or their relationships by uncritically buying into the systems and constructs that maintain and mimic the foundations of heterosexist privilege.<sup>63</sup> The current push for same-sex marriage equality is perhaps the

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<sup>61</sup> Berlant and Warner, 344.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 346.

<sup>63</sup> Jagose, 92.



best and most readily accessible example. In partial critique of the agenda to gain same-sex couples the *right* to marry, some feminist and queer scholars, like Mary Hunt, have argued that gays and lesbians (and all people) may be better served by the open challenge of the “broken model” of heterosexual marriage as it exists today, with its accompanying social and economic privileges as well as its soaring divorce rates, rather than the creation of a new hegemony that would force all relationships (homo- or hetero-sexual) into this broken and binary model.<sup>64</sup> This is a wonderful example of the ways in which the queer project might be used to creatively expand the discussion beyond specific identity-based “individual rights campaigns” (i.e., civil rights) to include the broader goal of relational justice for all (i.e., human rights).<sup>65</sup>

One of the most promising contributions of queer seems to be just such an expansive application of its theory. As queer is occasionally venturing beyond a predominant focus on issues of sexuality, it is also offering a helpful critique of other identities aside from sex and gender. For example, Eve Sedgwick claims that recent queer work is moving outward

along dimensions that can’t be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these *and other* identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses, for example. Intellectuals and artists of color whose sexual self-definition includes “queer” ... are using the leverage of “queer” to do a new kind of justice to the fractal intricacies of language, skin, migration, and state.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> “Roundtable Discussion: Same-Sex Marriage,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20, no. 2 (2004).

<sup>65</sup> Mary Hunt, “Roundtable Discussion: Same-Sex Marriage,” 91.

<sup>66</sup> As quoted in Jagose, 99. (Italics in original.)



Though not always an explicit objective of queer theorists, the cause of creating more just relationships and a more just society in which power can be equally accessible and mutually shared seems central to some of queer theory's newer trends. In refusing to be compartmentalized and resisting whatever might be considered normal, queer theory hopes to bring a new world into being, one in which multiple identities and ways of being can be valued without individuals having to conform to fixed notions that necessarily exclude those who cannot or choose not to do so.

However, there are also some legitimate critiques made about queer theory that question its ability to live into this more expansive potential. For example, while acknowledging "the radical potential of queerness to challenge and bring together all those deemed marginal and all those committed to liberatory politics," Cathy J. Cohen argues that the "problem ... with such a conceptualization and expectation of queer identity and politics is that in its present form queer politics has not emerged as an encompassing challenge to systems of domination and oppression."<sup>67</sup> Namely, it has tended to ignore or elide issues of race, class, and (to some extent) gender as distinct categories of identity within the queer community. Cohen, who personally finds the word *queer* "fraught with unspoken assumptions that inhibit [its] radical potential," warns,

In its current rendition, queer politics is coded with class, gender, and race privilege, and may have lost its potential to be a politically expedient organizing tool for addressing the needs — and mobilizing the bodies — of people of color.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 24.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. 34-35.





Cohen's point is well made. The radical potential of queer must include a sustained analysis and understanding of the intersectionality of identities and oppressions that characterize the reality and messiness of life for individuals. In an effort to foreground this urgent objective, E. Patrick Johnson has coined the word "quare" (based on his grandmother's "thick, black, southern" vernacular pronunciation of queer) "to critique stable notions of identity *and, at the same time, to locate racialized and class knowledges.*"<sup>69</sup> Johnson values the "inclusivity and playful spirit" of queer, but wants to counteract its "homogenizing tendencies" that obscure the realities of racism, classism, and sexism operative in the queer community.<sup>70</sup> While appreciating Johnson's use of "quare" and wholeheartedly agreeing with both his and Cohen's call to examine and deal with the unchecked racism, classism, and sexism present in much queer theorizing, I cannot yet disregard queer as a useful term. I am not yet ready to abandon the idealism of its radical aspirations, for one thing, and the term "quare" is so new and unfamiliar that its introduction in the day-to-day life of my congregation would hinder what progress we are making to establish a shared vocabulary for genuine conversation and dialogue. That being said, I am fully supportive of the agenda behind the use of "quare" and am committed to openly discussing the complex intersections of heterosexism, sexism, racism, and classism (among forms of oppression) that exist. Irene Monroe offers one concrete example:

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<sup>69</sup> E. Patrick Johnson, "'Quare' Studies, Or (almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother," in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 126-7. (Italics for emphasis.)

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 127.



As a fractured group both politically and socially, African-American LGBT people reside as resident aliens who too often live bifurcated existences in both communities. While our black skin ostensibly gives us residence in our black communities, our sexual orientation, most times, evicts us from them. And while our sexual orientation gives us residence in the larger LGBT community, racism constantly thwarts any efforts for coalition building, which weakens the larger movement for sexual equality.<sup>71</sup>

In articulating these experiences, LGBT people of color are raising a necessary and critical challenge to queer discourse by insisting that we understand how these multiple sites of identity and oppression complicate our coalition building and frustrate our cooperative work for justice. I believe this work must become an integral focus of the queer project.

### In My Own Words

Because I am interested in investigating what a broadly applied “queer theology” would look like in the day-to-day life of an individual faith congregation, it is imperative that I am able to describe exactly what *I* mean by queer. At one time or another, I have probably used queer in all of the senses outlined above, with the notable exception of using it pejoratively in order to shame and denigrate those marginalized by their sexual/gender expression or identity. Because I live and work in multiple contexts and am in conversation with multiple and diverse communities of discourse, I continue to use the word *queer* in different ways according to context and suitability. I try to be explicit about *how* I’m using the word when this is happening, or at least to remain mindful

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<sup>71</sup> “African-American LGBT People Saying it Loud,” in *The Witness* [database online]. Cambridge, Massachusetts June 11, 2002 (accessed January 21, 2007). Available from <http://www.thewitness.org/article.php?id=586>.



myself of both its intended and actual effect.<sup>72</sup> For example, when I am preaching, I often use the word “queer” instead of “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, etc.” because in my congregation, for some, this word still needs to be liberated *and* because I want to encourage those who are able to explore the limitations of these individual identity labels (LGBT) to do so. In many ways, the act of “reclaiming” the word must necessarily precede any further dialogue about its other meanings and their potential applications.

I typically do not intend to use the word *queer* only as a broad umbrella for LGBT persons, though I am somewhat comfortable with this usage because — for better or worse — this is a common and widely accepted use in the vernacular of a number of communities, including many MCC congregations. Additionally, the more edgy use of the term (to which I will soon turn) does not seem to preclude it. In my current context (i.e., twenty-first century United States), if someone identifies as a lesbian, gay man, or bisexual or transgender person, they necessarily transgress and live outside the realm of what is considered normative. Therefore, queer can be used for all of these categories, at least, as an adjectivally apt term. However, this is not the primary way in which I intend to use the word.

Queer, for me, is a word that must always exist in some continuity with gay and lesbian history, and —more specifically— with gay and lesbian liberation movements. Queer cannot yet (if ever) be completely separated from the historical and lived

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<sup>72</sup> Sometimes I use the word to intentionally scandalize or titillate in situations where I am fairly certain it is understood primarily as insult in order to challenge this understanding. At other times, I will very much *want* to use the word queer because it more accurately describes what I intend to say, but because I am mindful of how it will actually land on the ear and heart of the listener, I refrain. I believe there is a great power in language that can be used for good or for ill. I aspire to nurture within myself a healthy respect for this power, and to use it in ways that are not harmful, ways that are ultimately liberative, ways that may *stretch* but not *break* the limits of a conversation and/or relationship.





experience of individual gay men and lesbians who were/are oppressed by societies and institutions intolerant of same-sex relationships or an individual's inability/choice not to conform to rigid expectations of gender performance and propriety. Because queer is rooted in the hope of creating a more affirming and equitable world for LGBT people, queer is a word that should maintain a preferential option<sup>73</sup> for sexual/gender justice, as well as an embodied, real-world connection to actual individual lives affected by present injustices.

Queer is not identical with gay and lesbian liberation history, however. Queer is the best descriptor I know of the space-between — that complex and tension-filled chasm that separates the articulation and liberation of these non-normative sexual/gender identity categories (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender) and the exposure of their inadequacy to fully categorize or describe most individuals. Queer is the elusive force that keeps these categories from becoming fixed or essential. In organic terms, queer is something of an anti-coagulant; in terms of the illusory black/white dichotomy, queer is grey area. In the same way that queer originally expanded the realm of discourse to include bisexuals and transgender persons, I hope that it will continue to be expansively inclusive of other sex/gender outsiders currently marginalized.<sup>74</sup> Queer is a constantly transgressive and boundary-blurring movement that questions assumptions about what is natural or even good about one's sexual identity, gender expression, or relationships. Queer is not unconcerned with sexual or relational ethics, however, despite this being a

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<sup>73</sup> Borrowing a concept from liberation theology, in which God expresses a persistent preferential option for the poor.

<sup>74</sup> For example: the intersexed, those whose relationships are neither monogamous nor binary, or those whose sexual expressions may be considered taboo for other reasons.



criticism leveled by some who are quite comfortable functioning within the boundaries protected by such unquestioned assumptions. It is precisely because queer is concerned with justice that ethics are of central importance; however, queer is willing to push the inquiry into what constitutes ethical in any given relationship or situation to extremes.

Ideally, the queer project also promises to contribute, in its broader application, to situations and concerns not altogether related to sex or gender. As queer maintains its edge, it leads to the questioning of other categories of identity (e.g., race, nationality, class, religious affiliation) as well as any assumption about what is believed to be “natural” or “right” for all persons, times, and contexts. It is this aspect of the word *queer*, for example, that I believe has the most potential to help the LGBT community resist collapsing into satisfied self-absorption when the political rights currently being sought are finally granted.<sup>75</sup> I believe that queer offers a necessary critique of any attempt to establish new standards of normativity, which become inclusive of one’s own existence and desires by simply creating different categories of marginalized and oppressed outsiders. I also believe queer offers a critical warning against simply replicating or assuming normative structures of dominant culture.

The dictionary entry for the word *queer*, then, is always in the process of being written and revised. Its hermeneutic is one of suspicion, interrogation, transgression, and reversal in the cause of bringing a queerer, more just, world into being. I am convinced

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<sup>75</sup> I confess that I am somewhat concerned that many in the LGBT community will be tempted to cease their work for social and political justice for *all* of the marginalized once they themselves secure some of the civil rights currently being pursued (i.e., marriage rights, domestic partnership benefits, inheritance rights, etc.). As stated previously, I am also very troubled by the ways in which current LGBT political movements tend to be oblivious or indifferent to issues of race, class, nationality, etc.



the application of this queer hermeneutic to topics of spirituality and theology holds significant and positive potential to further liberate and inspire not only gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender or intersex persons, and those with other non-normative relationships and expressions of erotic desire, but all people of faith. In recent years, queer commentary on the Jewish and Christian scriptures has yielded a wealth of fresh and meaningful exegetical insights, allowing the so-called “Word of God” to become a living and relevant word for sexual/gender minorities.<sup>76</sup> I believe this example, notably one of many possible, is only the beginning. Such application of queer is not merely a mental activity, but one I argue has specific implications for how we live our lives as fully embodied people in the world, in general, and as members of spiritual communities or congregations, in particular. Of course, this is possible only if we are willing to undertake a constant journey with the Queer Spirit, which is what I sincerely hope I, my congregation, and the broader movement of MCC will risk doing.

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<sup>76</sup> See *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*, ed. Robert Goss and Mona West (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000) and *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Ken Stone (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001).





## CHAPTER 2

### QUEER THEOLOGY

In the same way that the word *queer* has undergone a vast evolution in meaning over the past several decades, so too have the theological reflections that emerge from queer experiences. In this chapter, I hope to outline some of the ways in which this evolution has taken shape, identify some core queer theological values, and articulate some potential benefits of queer theology.

#### The Liberation Roots of Queer Theology

Nearly four decades ago, liberation theology began to emerge as a distinct discipline out of the experiences of people in Latin America, specifically the experiences of the poor. With growing confidence, theologians in Latin America were taking seriously the plight of the poor and assuming the right and responsibility for making their theology and the work of the church contextually relevant for that particular life experience. Thus initially, liberation theology began as a critique of the church and of Christians from the point of view of the poor. It then developed into a critique of broader society and the ideologies sustaining the status quo, many of which were bolstered by the church's theology. Finally, it became a more sophisticated interpretation of the Christian faith flowing directly out of the suffering, struggle, and hope of the poor.<sup>77</sup> This was a revolutionary movement meant to transform society through a fundamental change in

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<sup>77</sup> Phillip Berryman, *Liberation Theology: Essential Facts about the Revolutionary Movement in Latin America--and Beyond* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 6.



economic, political, and social structures that would facilitate the literal feeding of the hungry and clothing of the naked, as well as the genuine love of neighbor.

Liberation theology is not unique to Latin America, however. In the introduction to their popular text book on liberation theologies, Mary Potter Engel and Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite note,

All around the world popular movements are rising up out of the culture of silence and finding their voices. In Latin America, Asia, Africa, North America, Europe, and the Pacific Rim, the spirit is moving and communities of the oppressed are forming, crying out against their suffering and the social, political, economic, and religious structures that give rise to that suffering.<sup>78</sup>

Liberation theologians find much to criticize about the assumption perpetuated largely by white, male theologians that there even exists a universal theology. On the contrary, liberation theologians have argued from the beginning that theology is always shaped by social location, by the differing social, economic, political and cultural contexts in which one thinks theologically.<sup>79</sup> Social location determines “the peculiar interests, emphases, viewpoints, analyses, and aims” of a particular theology, which is why it is important to speak of “liberation theologies” rather than any one liberation theology.<sup>80</sup> Despite the uniqueness of each liberation theology, however, there are connections between them at the intersection of the different systems of oppression they seek to address.

Queer theology is firmly rooted in liberation theologies, including specifically feminist theology and theologies of gay and lesbian liberation. Queer theology is

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<sup>78</sup> Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel, eds., *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 1.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.



identical to neither, however, as it is a newer and constantly evolving theological project. It does share with both of these other liberation theologies certain objectives, which aim to liberate the church, society, and individuals from systems of oppression based on limited constructions of gender and sexuality.

It is important to foreground this liberation aspect of queer theology since one of the greatest critiques of queer theory — one of the primary theoretical influences shaping queer theology — is that it is hopelessly idealistic and disconnected from the actual lives of embodied people, as well as the very real struggles they face.<sup>81</sup> During a class lecture on June 14, 2006, Robert Goss noted that queer theology may actually be the saving grace of queer theory, as it counters this critique by its commitment to liberation and its aim of addressing real problems caused by systematic oppression based on issues of gender and sexuality. Elizabeth Stuart agrees. She argues that “queer theology has the potential to make a contribution to queer theory and rescue it from nihilism because the Church is the only community under a divine command and constructed according to a divine logic to be queer.”<sup>82</sup> Queer *theology*, since it is a theology and not a theory, is invested in the Biblical and Christian tradition of transformation — from individual lives that are transformed, to the church (including both local congregations and the church universal), to the entire world.

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<sup>81</sup> Elizabeth Stuart, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies: Repetitions with Critical Difference* (Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2003), 103.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.





## The Evolution of Queer Theology

Queer theology continues to evolve from its roots in feminist theology and theologies of gay and lesbian liberation. An overview of the major stages in this evolution to date, as well as some speculation about areas of future direction, should provide a helpful context for understanding queer theology.

### Defense Against the Dark Arts<sup>83</sup>

The “big bang” that birthed what is becoming a distinctly queer theology (and, by no coincidence, MCC) was the collision between elements of the church and society, which were influenced by certain religious teachings against same-gender sexual desire and relationships, on the one hand, and individuals identifying themselves as gay men or lesbians (and eventually bisexual and transgender persons) who finally said, “enough is enough!” on the other. These individuals began to claim their voice to describe the oppression and discrimination they were experiencing and to demand changes, culminating in receipt of respect, equality, and full inclusion in the church and society. In many ways, we are still living amidst the rubble of this cosmic collision, as churches and governments continue to react in counter-response by enacting legislation (ecclesial and secular) aimed at reinforcing the systems that support this oppression and discrimination.

In the same way that the fictional students at Hogwart’s School of Witchcraft and Wizardry must begin with classes called “Defense Against the Dark Arts” in order to

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<sup>83</sup> J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (New York: A.A. Levine Books, 1998). This phrase, coined by Rowling in her series of Harry Potter books, is one I find apt in describing a particular era and hermeneutic in queer theological discourse, especially Biblical criticism and commentary.



learn techniques to block spells, charms, hexes, and jinxes aimed at them *before* they can learn how to create their own magic, so LGBT Christians had to begin their quest for liberation by learning techniques for defending themselves against the attacks of homophobic religion. The primary context for this struggle was (and in many instances still is) the Bible. In particular, early gay and lesbian liberationists had to learn to deal defensively with six “clobber passages” or “texts of terror”<sup>84</sup> consistently leveled at them as proof that same-gender sexual desire and activity is sinful and that individuals who feel same-sex attraction or participate in sexual relationships with person(s) of their own biological sex must repent. These passages include the story of Sodom (Genesis 19:4-11), references in the holiness code of ancient Israel (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13), and three references from the Greek New Testament (1 Corinthians 6:9-10, 1 Timothy 1:9-10, and Romans 1:26-27).<sup>85</sup>

A majority of the material published about homosexuality and Christianity from the late 1960’s through the early 1990’s was focused on this defense against “textual harassment.”<sup>86</sup> These theologians and biblical scholars used a variety of historical critical methods to uncover the social context and concerns that shaped these texts. They also spent a great deal of time studying the original languages for words that have since been

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<sup>84</sup> This term, borrowed from feminist Biblical scholar Phyllis Trible, is one Robert Goss uses to reference these texts.

<sup>85</sup> A discussion of these texts is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>86</sup> Mary Ann Tolbert, “Foreword,” in *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*, ed. Robert E. Goss and Mona West (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000). The term “textual harassment” is used by Tolbert to explain this use of scripture to harass and harm queer people.



translated, often uncritically, as synonyms for the modern term homosexual.<sup>87</sup> Notably, many of these arguments included or considered foundational essentialist understandings of sexual identity. Stuart summarizes this understanding well when she writes,

Broadly speaking, essentialists argue that a person's sexual orientation is an objective and transcultural fact. Though essentialists may disagree as to the origin of sexual orientation (some would attribute it to genetic make-up, others to a person's first pleasurable encounter or to interaction with their parents), they would agree that homosexuality is a transcultural and transhistorical phenomenon.<sup>88</sup>

This essentialist conception allowed gay and lesbian liberationists to use the strategies of others whose liberation hermeneutic is based on an ethnic-minority model of identity. If there exists an essential gay or lesbian identity, which is not chosen but simply is, then a number of arguments can be made against any sort of discrimination (e.g. exclusion from the church) based on such an unchangeable or natural characteristic. Theologians like John McNeil illustrate how the primary approach of this method is thoroughly apologetic.<sup>89</sup>

### Transitioning from Defense to Offense: Reading with LGBT Eyes

Several lesbian and gay theologians were able to move beyond defense against the dark arts and turn their attention to texts and topics that had not been chosen for them by

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<sup>87</sup> Examples of these books include: Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor? A Positive Christian Response* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978), John McNeil, *The Church and the Homosexual* (Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews, and McNeel, 1976), and Daniel A. Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality* (San Francisco: Alamo Square Press, 1994).

<sup>88</sup> Stuart, 8.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.





their opponents. A strategy of reading the Bible and exploring theological themes through the lens of lesbian and gay<sup>90</sup> experience began to emerge in the work of such theologians as Nancy L. Wilson and Chris Glaser.<sup>91</sup> Wilson, a pastor and elder in the MCC, published *Our Tribe: Queer Folk, God, Jesus, and the Bible*, perhaps the most assertive and edgy work in this emerging category, in 1995.<sup>92</sup> In this book, she looks for characters in the Bible who may be considered the precursors or ancestors of modern “queer folk.”<sup>93</sup> She analyzes the similarities between such scriptural relationships as Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan, the Bethany Family (i.e., Mary, Martha, and Lazarus), and many eunuchs, on the one hand, and the relationships of contemporary gays and lesbians, on the other. The primary strategy employed in this analysis was described in a recent lecture by Mona West as an “offensive ‘outing’” strategy.<sup>94</sup> Glaser uses the experience of “coming out” as a gay or lesbian person as a lens through which to examine the many ways in which people are called by God to “come out” as a sacred act of liberation. He likewise looks for occasions in the Bible when characters have to “come out” in specific ways in order to liberate themselves from captivity or oppression.

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<sup>90</sup> I have intentionally not included bisexual and transgender at this particular time, since the authors to which I’m referring did not yet include any substantial exploration of bisexuality or transgenderism, even if they may have occasionally included the terms.

<sup>91</sup> Chris Glaser, *Coming Out as Sacrament* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1998) and Nancy Wilson, *Our Tribe: Queer Folks, God, Jesus, and the Bible* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995).

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Wilson’s use of the term queer is generally a coalition term drawing together gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons. Her use of the term was not, at the time of publication, influenced by queer theory.

<sup>94</sup> “Queer Explorations for Pastoral, Theological, and Ethical Issues,” Episcopal Divinity School, June 13, 2006.



Wilson and Glaser, as well as many other theologians who use this type of reading strategy and construction of theology, also rely to a great extent on an essentialist understanding of sexual identity.<sup>95</sup> As Elizabeth Stuart writes, “Foundational to their theology is the stable gay/lesbian self whose experience is strong enough to function as a hermeneutical lens through which to interpret scripture and to extend backwards through history in a tribal genealogy.”<sup>96</sup> As we will see, those who reject this essentialist understanding find this to be a considerable flaw in this theological strategy.

Another critique of this approach can be made on the basis of its investment in existing systems of privilege based on identity-based relationship status. For example, this approach very rarely offers any sustained criticism of such institutions as heterosexual marriage; rather it simply desires to gain access to the privileges provided by these systems for gay and lesbian couples. In many instances, this can come off as an apologetic clamoring for the rights to bankrupt institutions, which seems to be rooted in a systemic case of low self-esteem. I wholeheartedly agree with Stuart when she argues, “the gay self is destined to constantly play theological catch-up with the heterosexual self as long as those very categories of sexual identity go unexamined.”<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> This was true at least at the time of the publications referenced. Notably, both Wilson and Glaser, as well as others, have likely been influenced by later developments in queer religious thought.

<sup>96</sup> Stuart, 27.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 28.



## Queer Theological Imagination

In the past decade, certain theologians have begun to more explicitly utilize the theoretical framework of queer theory in their academic work. The primary shift this requires is a fundamentally different understanding of identity. The “‘essence’ of queer theory” is that

There is no essential sexuality or gender. ‘Queer’ then is not actually another identity alongside lesbian and gay (although it is sometimes rather confusingly used to convey a radical coalition of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons) but a radical destabilizing of identities and resistance to the naturalizing of any identity.<sup>98</sup>

The first work that began to move in this direction was Robert Goss’s *Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto*. In this work, Goss does not go so far as to incorporate an understanding of the word *queer* that takes queer theory into account; however, he does employ the word *queer* as an active coalitional political strategy for destabilizing dominant discourses about sexual identity by exposing and parodying the limitations of any such stable categories. Like queer theorists, he relies heavily on the work of Michel Foucault to establish that “a gay/lesbian identity was not given, it was made” and that “if lesbian and gay people were conscious of the constructed nature of their identity then they could choose to reconstruct their identities in ways that escaped the worst aspects of heterosexuality,” a project Goss identifies as a primary work of gay and lesbian theologians.<sup>99</sup> Though primarily a work of deconstruction, *Jesus Acted Up*

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>99</sup> Stuart, 81.





does suggest a queer reconstruction of the *basileia*<sup>100</sup> of Jesus rooted in “solidarity, compassion, loving service, transgressive action, and inclusive table fellowship with others who are oppressed.”<sup>101</sup> These values serve as the roots of a queer liberation theology that Goss develops more fully in his later work.

Following Goss’s earlier work, queer theology began to emerge as a category of theological work distinctly different than gay and lesbian liberation theologies by rejecting the validity of any stable categories of sexuality or gender. As Stuart notes, “queer theology is not a ‘natural’ development of gay and lesbian theology but rather an unnatural development which emerges from the fissures within gay and lesbian theology to which the repetitions within it draw attention.”<sup>102</sup> Queer theology constantly challenges heteronormativity,<sup>103</sup> a term used by Goss and others “to describe the dominant sex/gender system that privileges heterosexual males while it subordinates women and disprivileges gender/sexual transgressors.”<sup>104</sup> In his most recent work, Goss further argues that “this heteronormative understanding creates a gender/sexual

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<sup>100</sup> The Greek word typically translated “kingdom” or “realm.”

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>103</sup> Heteronormativity refers to the lived expression of sexuality and gender that is considered normative by majority/centrist society. In the context of the United States and other “Western” cultures, this generally means that gender is determined by biological sex and that the gender of the object of one’s sexual and affectional desire is necessarily opposite to one’s own gender. This paradigm is normalized in the institution of heterosexual marriage.

<sup>104</sup> Goss, Robert E., *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 224.



fundamentalism that pathologizes gender and sexual differences and fails to accept the fluidity of gender and sexual identity.”<sup>105</sup>

Taking its cue from queer theory, queer theology also resists the establishment of any sort of gay and lesbian hegemony. Goss claims this objective in his own work. He writes,

“Queer” turns upside down, inside out, and defies heteronormative *and homonormative* theologies. I use “queer” theologically, not only as an identity category but also as a tool of theological deconstruction, for “queer” as a verb means “to spoil or to interfere.” Heteronormative theologies exclude me except in their hermeneutics of abomination while gay/lesbian normative theologies exclude those who do not neatly fit into the categories.<sup>106</sup>

In order to expose the limitations of any normalizing forces, be they hetero- or homo-normative, theologians like Goss embrace the “hermeneutical role of normative transgression in emerging queer theologies.”<sup>107</sup> Such transgression subverts and blurs traditional boundaries and existing paradigms with “liberative action driven by the imagination of alternative possibilities and hopes.”<sup>108</sup> This evolving queer perspective aims at including everyone and allowing differences to emerge and co-exist without being reconciled into some metanormative model. The ultimate aim of this practice of “queering” is to “imaginatively reconstruct theology, spirituality, and church practices in new, inclusive configurations.”<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 228-9. (Italics for emphasis.)

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 250.



Queer theology aims to create a world that resists fixity of gender or sexual identity. Likewise, it calls into question any rigidly defined norms for performing gender or expressing sexuality. At the radically inclusive queer table, there is room not only for those who identify as lesbian, gay, heterosexual, bisexual, or transgender, but also those who consider themselves intentional genderfuckers<sup>110</sup> or who flow among and between these unstable categories of identity. Additionally, there is room for those whose paradigms of sexual relationships subvert dominant models, including leather folk, BDSMers,<sup>111</sup> and those involved in various configurations of polyamorous relationship. This degree of inclusion is offensive to many who are invested in gaining political privilege or ecclesial “acceptance” based on only a slight “tweaking” of dominant models of gender/sexual normativity, since it sabotages their normalizing agenda.

Bisexual Argentinean scholar Marcella Althaus-Reid may be the theologian most offensive in this regard. She insists that queer theology must be passionately and unapologetically “indecent” if it is to appropriately jar us from our unchecked assumptions and our participation in interlocking systems of oppression and injustice.<sup>112</sup> For her, sexuality is the proper access point to examine the Christian theology, since the

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<sup>110</sup> i.e., those who make the self-conscious attempt to “fuck with,” subvert, or queer (used as a verb) normative or traditional understandings of gender identity, gender roles, and gender presentation through the use of parody, exaggeration, and other intentional ways of creating gender dissonance or ambiguity.

<sup>111</sup> The acronym BDSM includes the major sub-groupings Bondage and Discipline (B&D), Dominance and Submission (D&S), and Sadism and Masochism or Sadomasochism (S&M). It refers to a number of different sexual practices including domination, submission, bondage, role play, power sex, and other forms of “kinky” sex. BDSMers generally agree on a baseline sexual ethic of “safe, sane, and consensual.”

<sup>112</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000).





entire development of Christian theology has been so driven by “a sexual project concerned with the praxis of specific heterosexual understandings elevated to a sacred level.”<sup>113</sup> Thus by “disrupting the sexual ideology of Christianity, a whole political project which works against people’s lives is also disrupted.”<sup>114</sup> Althaus-Reid’s work is perhaps the most sophisticated at exploring the intersections of different aspects of social location and how they ought to work together in the cause of liberation, a topic to which we will now turn.

### Queer Potentialities: Transgressions of Self-Interest

One of the most promising potentialities of queer theology, I believe, lies in its ability to critically understand the points of conversion and overlap between different systems of oppression and to offer creative transgressive actions that take all of these various aspects of social location into account for the larger cause of divine/human liberation for all, especially the most vulnerable and invisible. As Goss argues,

Queer theologies proceed from critical analysis of the social context that forms our sexual and gender experiences *and the web of interlocking oppressions* and from our innovative and transgressive practices. Queer theology is an organic or community-based project that includes our diverse sexual contextualities, our particular social experiences of homo/bi/transphobic oppression *and their connection to other forms of oppression*, and our self-affirmations of sexual/gendered differences, and it will impact the future development of liberation theologies.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003), 9.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Goss, *Queering Christ*, 253. (Italics for emphasis.)



Whereas one of the criticisms of gay and lesbian liberation theologies was their obvious motivation in and occasional limitation to matters of self-interest, no such criticism can be leveled at queer theologies that take seriously the queer call to transgress the many traditional boundaries and binarisms (i.e., false dichotomies) that undergird all oppressive ideologies. Queer theologies rooted in erotic justice must respond, for example, not only to oppressions based on gender/sexuality, but also in compassionate solidarity with those struggling to overturn systems of racial and economic injustice.

The single-focused goal of self-interested liberation that has occasionally been characteristic of gay and lesbian theologies, as well as feminist theologies, black theologies, and other liberation efforts, cannot be the end result of a genuine queer theology. Queer theologies must seriously acknowledge and find creative solutions to the problem that occurs when various social justice movements become compartmentalized or view their work in terms of competition for limited resources. Historically, certain progresses to confront oppressions have been made, both intentionally and unintentionally, by perpetuating or failing to confront other oppressions against different groups. For example, racism was confronted and certain civil rights were gained by African Americans; at the same time, the rights of sexual minorities and women within the African American community were not deemed equally worthy of consideration. Likewise, heterosexism was confronted by gay, white men who often failed to understand the ways in which they perpetuated sexism and racism. And, heterosexism and sexism were confronted by white, lesbian women who often failed to understand the unique ways in which they themselves disadvantaged women of color and poor women by not confronting the injustices of racism and classism.





I am impressed with the way in which María Lugones articulates the problem, as well as the challenge and opportunity presented if we can begin to make the connections between the intersection of oppressions. She writes:

Intersectionality reveals what is not seen when categories such as gender and race are conceptualized as separate from each other. The move to intersect categories has been motivated by the difficulty in making visible those who are dominated and victimized in terms of both categories. Though everyone in capitalist Eurocentered modernity is both raced and gendered, not everyone is dominated or victimized in terms of their race and gender. Kimberlé Crenshaw and other women of color feminists have argued that the categories have been understood as homogenous and as picking out the dominant in the group as the norm; thus *women* picks out white bourgeois women, *men* picks out white bourgeois men, *black* picks out black heterosexual men, and so on. It becomes logically clear then that the logic of categorial separation distorts what exists at the intersection, such as violence against women of color. Given the construction of the categories, the intersection misconstrues women of color. So, once intersectionality shows us what is missing, we have ahead of us the task of reconceptualizing the logic of the intersection so as to avoid separability. It is only when we perceive gender and race as intermeshed or fused that we even see women of color.<sup>116</sup>

We might also say that it is only when we perceive sexuality and race as intermeshed that we can see LGBT people of color, or that only when we perceive class and sexuality as intermeshed that we can see poor queer people, and so on.

With its attention on the edges of marginality and the disruptions in stable identity categories, queer theology has the potential to help us understand and meet this challenge. Queer theologies exist on the margin between what is decent/acceptable and what is indecent/scandalous. They seek to expose the reality that very often what is considered decent/acceptable according to the status quo and existing systems of power and privilege

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<sup>116</sup> Maria Lugones, "Heterosexuality and the Colonial /Modern Gender System," *Hypatia* 22 (2007) 192-3.





is actually that which might rightly be viewed as indecent/scandalous through the eyes of God and the lens of divine justice. Because it is a *theology* and not only an *academic theory*, queer theology is invested in the redemption and transformation of these realities for the larger cause (as mentioned previously) of divine/human liberation for all, especially the most vulnerable or invisible.

### Core Queer Theological Values

As queer theology is emerging, several core values seem to be guiding its evolution. In the paragraphs that follow, I will offer some speculation about some of these core values as well as the significance they may suggest for future queer theological thought. This list is merely illustrative and in no way exhaustive.

#### Goodness of Bodies/Sexual Bodies

As Althaus-Reid succinctly says, “Queer theology is a materialist theology that takes bodies seriously.”<sup>117</sup> While on the surface this may seem a simple thing, it represents a significant shift away from the body-denying ethos of much of Christian tradition. Not only has Christianity in the main tended to denigrate and debase human bodies in general, giving primary attention to the presumed separate — and superior — spirit or soul, but it has added insult to injury by hating specific bodies even more than others: i.e., female bodies, bodies of color, impoverished bodies, bodies with disabilities, and — worst of all — openly sexual bodies. Queer bodies take on this abuse to an even

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<sup>117</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 19.



greater extent as they bend/blur/transgress the link between biological sex and gender or as they claim a bodily state of permanent ambiguity. A reclaiming of the sacredness of human bodies, in general, and of queer sexual bodies, in particular, is a central objective of queer theologies.

Because queer theology takes bodies seriously, it tends to be biographical in nature. “At the bottom line of Queer theologies, there are biographies of sexual migrants, testimonies of real lives in rebellions made of love, pleasure, and suffering.”<sup>118</sup> This foundation in personal embodied experience is something queer theologies share in common with many other liberation theologies, which likewise seek to hold themselves accountable to the lived experiences of people in particular social locations. Queer theology reclaims this lived experience of embodiment as a primary resource for our knowledge of God and one another. As Beverly Harrison writes, “*All* our relations to others — to God, to neighbor, to cosmos — [are] mediated through our bodies, which are the locus of our perception and attentiveness in people.”<sup>119</sup> The body is thus reclaimed as the location of revelation. And since Christian theology purports to take seriously the incarnation (i.e., God’s embodiment in the human Jesus) as a revelatory sacred event, this aspect of queer theology seems particularly relevant for redeeming *Christian* spirituality from its body-negative history.

Because queer theology is also a sexual theology, it pays particular attention to the erotic potential present when boundaries between bodies are pleasurably and

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>119</sup> Beverly Wildung Harrison, “Human Sexuality and Mutuality,” in *Christian Feminism: Visions of a New Humanity*, ed. Judith L. Weidman (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 147-8.



positively transgressed. As Althaus-Reid writes, “A Queer theological project is not only a theology from and of the body: it is a theology of the traveling body which crosses borders between unnameable countries, and is given away by transversal kisses and re-configurations of desire.”<sup>120</sup> In understanding the erotic as a resource of divine discovery, queer theologians actually tap back into the ecstatic experiences of many early Christian mystics whose expression of union with God or Christ was laden with the language of eroticism and the sacred pleasure present in the transgression of bodily boundaries, including divine/human boundaries. Queer theologians are unembarrassed by these frankly sexual descriptions because they reinforce the belief that erotic sexual experiences can be avenues by which we come to discover more about ourselves, God, and one another in ways that transform us into more just and more loving people. This assertion is queer in that it spoils the agenda of dominant patriarchal theologies. In the words of Marvin Ellison,

Patriarchal Christianity has it wrong: The erotic is not a hostile, alien force lurking from within to bring us to ruin, but is rather an internal moral guidance system, grounded in our body’s responsiveness to respectful, loving touch. ... Contrary to patriarchal voices, ... erotic desires are not inherently selfish or antithetical to moral value. Progressive seekers of justice-love can well imagine living by an ethical eroticism that enjoys life’s pleasures and at the same time prods us to pursue a more ethical world. The erotic can fuel our passion for justice. It invites us to take ourselves *seriously* as sexual persons, *playfully* as erotic equals, and *persistently* as those who refuse to accept oppression as the way things must be.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>121</sup> Marvin M. Ellison, *Erotic Justice: A Liberating Ethic of Sexuality* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 81. (Italics in original.)





One of the strongest liberation roots of queer theology is found in this relentless insistence on the goodness of the human body, including queer bodies, and on the moral value of erotic sexual experiences based in justice-love.

### Fluidity vs. Fixity<sup>122</sup>

Perhaps the greatest challenge of and for queer theology is making peace with the fluidity that is its constant calling. For better or worse, we live in a world in which the disorienting feeling of chaos is occasionally and desirably balanced by orienting moments when we believe we have gotten a handle on something. Humans have typically treated issues of the body and sexuality in just this way and seem very reluctant to change. We are socialized to believe that reasonable assumptions can be made on the basis of supposedly stable factors such as biological sex, gender expression, and erotic desire.<sup>123</sup> Generally speaking, when a baby is born, we observe the genitals and make an automatic pronouncement that “It’s a boy” or “It’s a girl.” When young “boys” and “girls” head off to their first socializing encounters at school, we ask them respectively, “Do you have a girlfriend” or “Do you have a boyfriend?” These examples illustrate the ways in which the entire structure of heteronormativity is held up by assumptions about the fixity of stable categories of sex-gender-desire. One of the fun things queer theology inherits from queer theory is its ability to mess things up and topple that structure. Queer

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<sup>122</sup> Term used by Robert Goss in EDS course lecture on June 14, 2006.

<sup>123</sup> Here I speak of the dominant culture in the United States and other similar contexts. There may indeed exist other cultural contexts in which this socialization is not so obvious or ingrained, or in which the fluidity of these categories may even be openly treated.



insists that no such assumptions can be made. Furthermore, queer insists that when these assumptions are made, it is a sacred moral value to disrupt (i.e., *queer*) them.

The diverse experiences of transgender people confirm that biological sex is not ultimately or solely determinative in deciding gender. In fact, certain indicators of biological sex can be physically changed if someone desires to make those bodily transformations as part of their own journey toward authenticity and wholeness. Other people may choose to live in a perpetual state of gender ambiguity, to move freely among and between different gender expressions, or to intentionally parody the limitations of any gender binarisms by genderfucking. Queer theology insists that we listen to and honor the lived experiences of gender-variant people. As Justin Tanis writes, “While [academic gender] theories may be interesting, what is urgently needed is something that is relevant and useable in our lives and the only way to create such relevant material is to do so in the context of real, lived lives that speak about our own experiences.”<sup>124</sup> When we listen to and honor the diverse experiences of trans people, we can have no doubt that gender is indeed bigger than biological sex. Further, we can come to understand the value of promoting and protecting an individual’s sacred right to self-determination in such matters.

The diverse experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people likewise demonstrate the erroneous assumption of a stable link between gender and sexual desire. One’s identification as a “man” or a “woman” does not automatically infer any particular gender of the object(s) of one’s sexual or affectional desires. Growing out of its roots in

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<sup>124</sup> Justin Tanis, *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry and Communities of Faith* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 10.



gay and lesbian liberation theologies, queer theology insists on the sacred value of gay and lesbian relationships. Queer theology pushes the envelope even further, however, when it calls into question some of the other assumptions of fixity and stability rolled into the dominant heteronormative (and, to a lesser extent, homonormative) model. For example: Must all holy and faithful relationships be monogamous? Must they be restricted to only two people? Is the only sacred commitment one that lasts a lifetime? If one “comes out” as a lesbian or a gay man, is that necessarily once and for all, or might one later explore or claim another “identity” category that is more fluid?

It may be helpful to reiterate that this idea of fluidity versus fixity is both a challenge of and *for* queer theology. Unfortunately, it is not necessarily the case that those who identify as gay or lesbian are easily able to take the step beyond their own experience and embrace the experience of gender-queers or people whose relationships do not mimic the heteronormative model of monogamous marriage. Many gay and lesbian people tend to wish and work for liberation only in as much as they can move themselves from the unacceptable margins back to the acceptable center. The central objective of queer theology that aims to subvert fixity is bound to unsettle those gays and lesbians who manage to regain and maintain their place in the pyramid of privilege by investing in certain “stable” aspects of the heteronormative status quo. It can be as difficult for those whose life experiences have led them to live in grey area and question the status quo to live in a constant state of flux as it can for those new to the experience. It should behoove us to remain mindful of the spiritual challenge this value of fluidity presents to all people, even those who may have theoretically embraced it.





So far, this intentional subversion of fixity has been applied most readily in terms of gender or sexual desire. As alluded to earlier, I believe that this hermeneutic of subverting fixity should be applied more broadly and may come to expose and overturn other identities or systems we have tended to assume are fixed or stable. This could apply to matters of race, class, ability, ethnicity, and even religious affiliation. For example, one of the trends in recent Christian theologizing, as demonstrated by such authors as Kathy Rudy and Rowan Williams, has been to prioritize baptismal Christian identity as one that trumps and sets aside all other identities.<sup>125</sup> While there is obvious theological insight in this that is worthy of further exploration, I am not as quick to disregard the challenge queer theorists like Alison Webster might offer “that surely Christian identity is as unstable or slippery as a sexual identity.”<sup>126</sup> Indeed, Christian identity is often as individually determined as any sexual or gender identity. I believe the queer project insists that we apply our core value of fluidity to some of the theological categories and concepts we have yet to question. My hope is that it will lead us, at the very least, into an increased appreciation of interreligious dialogue and inclusion.

### Inclusivity and Hospitality

A somewhat legitimate heir of gay and lesbian liberation, queer theology values a radical inclusivity in Christian community that welcomes the outcast, the marginalized, the untouchable, and all of those who have been told by exclusivist religious authorities

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<sup>125</sup> As noted by Stuart, 106

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.



that they are unworthy, unloved, or invisible. Queer theologians begin with the core assumption that every individual is created in the image of God (*imago dei*) and, therefore, is of inherent sacred worth. Some people fear that this radical welcome will do away with any standards of ethical conduct in community, but this fear is unfounded. By valuing inclusivity, queer theologians affirm the dignity of all people and the ideal of building a community of mutual love and support where all people can participate as their most authentic selves. Far from rejecting moral standards, the types of ethical behaviors such a community must nurture in order to be radically inclusive are substantial.

In her recent book *Where the Edge Gathers: Building a Community of Radical Inclusion*, Yvette Flunder addresses this topic by affirming the “explicit call for the inclusion of the marginalized” and articulating clearly that this is a challenging notion of what it means to be Christian community. A veteran pastor of a vibrant community currently composed primarily of African Americans, including a number of same gender loving (SGL) persons, transgender persons, people living with HIV/AIDS, and others on the edges of society, Flunder believes hospitality and inclusivity are linked in their essential importance in making this type of community possible. She argues that they “must be coupled with accountability to and responsibility for the community if it is to be sustained.”<sup>127</sup> Offering a metaphor of village life, which attempts to capture the dual ideas of inclusivity/hospitality and accountability, she claims

The creation of Christian community among people marginalized by the church and society requires that the community maintain a presence of cultural familiarity while actively fighting and overcoming oppressive and exclusive

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<sup>127</sup> Flunder, Yvette A., *Where the Edge Gathers: Building a Community of Radical Inclusion* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005), ix-x.



theology. Sustaining community among people who visibly represent marginalized groups necessitates (a) the use of village ethics or knowing where the boundaries are when all things are exposed and (b) the importance of village table theology or giving everyone a seat at the central meeting place or welcome table.<sup>128</sup>

Queer theology shares with Flunder a vision of this type of community, as difficult as it may be to nurture and sustain, as a vision of “true community — true church” that “enables the celebration of diversity and inclusion of all peoples, especially those who have traditionally been marginalized by religious institutions.”<sup>129</sup>

Because queer theology aims to shape a church and society in which all people are included, queer theologians must remain attentive to the voices rising from the silence of the margins. Every time the community begins to become reasonably assured that all are included, it can be relatively certain that it has developed a growing comfort with a new status quo and that it needs to look again for those who are not present. The queer theological project is one that makes its nomadic home in the margins, and it must renew its constituency based on who is being marginalized in a given time and context by center-based theologies. Once again, this means that it is attentive and responsive to the intersections of oppressions and that it must raise its voice in solidarity with the excluded, beyond a limited self interest. The creation of a truly inclusive community is a core queer theological value — theoretically, sacramentally, and actually.

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., x.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., xiv.





## Contribution of Queer Theology

Queer theology has a tremendous gift to offer individuals, the church, our communities, and our world. As a marginal theology attentive to the permeations that exist between presumed fixed and solid boundaries, queer theology taps into what biologist Barry Lopez calls the “evolutionary potential” found at charged border zones.<sup>130</sup> In his eloquent article, “Into the Body of Another: Eros, Embodiment and Intimacy with the Natural World,” Douglas Burton-Christie describes this location as “the meeting point of two worlds, in the fluid space where they mingle and dance together.”<sup>131</sup> He goes on to say

To understand such a world means learning to accept its vital, insistent dynamism and its organic evolutionary developments as basic features of the landscape. To inhabit such a world means learning to dwell in a landscape where borders are fluid and permeable, where life unfolds in unexpected ways in the continuous movement of species back and forth across borders. It is easy to miss these subtle movements. Yet to do so is to risk missing the very life of the place. So it is with other ecotones that we inhabit, those fluid, often-contested spaces between the human and the “more than human” worlds, between matter and spirit, body and soul, heaven and earth, humanity and divinity. It is not easy to move across the borders between these worlds, or to inhabit the charged, liminal space that joins them together. The mental habit of dualism is, for many of us, so ingrained that it is difficult even to imagine doing so. Yet we must, for the sake of the world as well as for the sake of our own souls, try. Unless we are able to imagine these different worlds in relationship to one another, drawn together in a subtle, rhythmic dance, we will be condemned to live a thin, impoverished existence, bereft of intimacy, empty of feeling and spirit. And we will continue to visit our own sense of alienation upon the living world.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape* (New York: Bantam, 1987), 109-110, as quoted in Douglas Burton-Christie. “Into the Body of Another: Eros, Embodiment and Intimacy with the Natural World,” *Anglican Theological Review* 81 (1999): 13-37.

<sup>131</sup> Burton-Christie, 13.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.



Queer theology can help us learn to live in such a world, able not only to survive but to thrive in the liminal areas that constitute so much of our life together. In fact, queer theology gives us a constantly expanding vocabulary to discuss the ways in which the boundaries we thought were so fixed and the identities we thought were so stable were, in fact, neither. It allows us to reimagine with God a world in which borders are permeable and where, in the words of Burton-Christie, “life emerges nowhere else so fully and deeply as it does in the exchange across these borders.”<sup>133</sup>

While it grows out of a particular concern to overcome rigid assumptions about gender and sexuality, as well as the systems of discrimination and oppression built upon those assumptions, queer theology offers strategies for deconstructing other rigid systems that keep certain people excluded and underprivileged on the basis of seemingly innate or fixed characteristics. It also offers constructive tools for reimagining an inclusive world that is vibrant and alive with delightful variations and sacred surprises. Queer theology pushes us beyond the limitations of our own thinking and invites us to join in collaborative co-creation with the God whose imagination is not so limited. As a liberation theology, queer theology remains accountable to the lived experience of real people with real problems, real hopes, real dreams, real struggles. Its “public” is expansive and its agenda is dominated by the desire for divine justice-love. As individuals are empowered to name for themselves their embodied experiences, all of us are invited to question our unchecked assumptions and to stretch the limits of our smallness to include the recognition of those experiences, as well as to learn more about

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 17.



our own in the interaction. In this way, queer theology offers us a different way of seeing the world and ourselves in it, a vibrant and surprising world of endless gradations and nuances in which the disruption of rigidity is a manifestation of grace.





### CHAPTER 3

#### MAKING THE CONNECTIONS: DEVELOPING QUEER SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES

I believe that there must be real connections between theology and praxis if theology is to mean anything at all. In other words, what a congregation thinks and values must translate into its embodied lived experience and actions if its thoughts and values are accurate and actual. In fact, if integrity between theological thought and practical action does not exist, the validity and stability of that thought might rightly be called into question. Therefore, congregations need to be intentional about ensuring that such an integral link exists between their core theological values and how those values are lived out in the fullness of their congregational lives.

In this chapter, I hope to make the case for being intentional about developing an integrity of praxis flowing out of queer theological values. This will include some discussion of the troublesome gaps between theology and praxis I have observed in certain MCC churches. Additionally, because a key feature of the pastoral leader is to help the congregation develop such an integral and grounded praxis, I hope to outline some strategies that pastors of queer churches may use to be intentional about developing queer spiritual communities.

The author of the book of James said very succinctly, “Faith without works is dead.”<sup>134</sup> While this statement was made in the midst of a complex discussion about the nature of salvation, which is a topic beyond the scope of this thesis, it does describe well

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<sup>134</sup> James 2:17; 2:26; in the larger pericope 2:14-26.



what has long been seen as a problem if the content of one's faith beliefs are inconsistent with one's actions. The same sentiment is summed up in the adage, "You must practice what you preach," or similarly, "The proof of the pudding is in the eating." It is also the problem identified in the Bible and contemporary discussions of religion when charges of hypocrisy are made against those whose lived reality does not match their professed belief. The popular book *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity ... and Why It Matters* contains just such an indictment of Christianity.<sup>135</sup> The book reports the results of a Barna Group survey of youth between the ages of 16 and 29 in the United States, a majority of which see Christians as a group, first and foremost, as judgmental, hypocritical, and anti-gay. My gut instinct is that these percentages would be even higher for those who have been marginalized by the church because they are in some way queer. Consequently, it becomes all the more important for queer churches to be intentional about aligning their practice with their beliefs, values, and convictions.

The general conviction that faith practices should be in alignment with and flow directly out of one's core theological values is the foundation of the collaborative work *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* edited by Dorothy Bass and Miroslav Volf.<sup>136</sup> In her introduction to this volume, Bass argues that "Our thinking about God and our way of living should go hand in hand."<sup>137</sup> Craig Dykstra and Dorothy

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<sup>135</sup> David Kinnamon and Gabe Lyons. *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity ... and Why it Matters* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2007).

<sup>136</sup> *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass and Miroslav Volf (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2002).

<sup>137</sup> Dorothy C. Bass, "Introduction," in *Practicing Theology*, 2.



Bass say this more strongly, “Beliefs and practices can and should be understood in relation to one another” and should “reject the separation of thought and action, seeing in practice a form of cooperative and meaningful human endeavor in which the two are inextricably entwined.”<sup>138</sup> By focusing on Christian practices, contributing authors are able to “demand attentiveness to specific people doing specific things together within a specific frame of shared meaning.”<sup>139</sup> In other words, practices are the location where the rubber meets the road; they are the direct actions that bring theological belief to lived expression in the Christian community. It is also important to note that not only does theological belief shape practice, but the practices also have an influencing role in shaping theological belief. Our practices are formative in the sense that they shape our way of being and thinking in the world. Likewise, when we realize that the practices we find most meaningful are out of sync with our beliefs, an opening is made for us to revise and modify our beliefs.

This mutually dynamic relationship between theology and praxis is one of the primary concerns to which the leaders of theological communities must remain attentive. As Bass writes, “Those who lead theological communities need to find ways of ... preventing theological reflection from becoming overly abstract or distant from the messy realm where human beings dwell and where Christian life and ministry take place.”<sup>140</sup> This “messy realm” of “real life” is something to which leaders of

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<sup>138</sup> Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass, “A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices,” in *Practicing Theology*, 21.

<sup>139</sup> Bass, “Introduction,” in *Practicing Theology*, 3.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.





communities must continually draw attention. Israel Galindo also addresses this aspect of faith in his recent work as he writes to congregational leaders about helping their communities develop an “effective faith.”

A qualitative understanding of faith accepts that, as many scholars and theologians claim, faith is a normative human dimension — everyone has faith. Effective faith is the kind of faith that makes a difference — has an effect — on the way we live our lives. That is, effectual faith is a particular kind of faith, the kind of faith that has an overt effect on our lives: the way we behave, the way we think, the way we make decisions, the values we hold, and the response we make to life.<sup>141</sup>

If faith communities are not attentive to ensuring that faith is effective and that there is an integral relationship between thinking and doing, between theological thought and praxis, then they run the risk of becoming irrelevant to individual members of the community, the community at large, and the larger world.

My hope is to take this general question about integrating theology and praxis and apply it specifically to the integration of queer theology and congregational praxis in MCC. The previous chapter outlines some examples of core theological values, which in no way constitute a complete list, but which will serve as a good beginning to this conversation. As congregations that provide alternatives to the hegemony of heteronormativity that permeates both church and culture, MCC’s work of integrating theological belief and praxis is necessarily a continuously countercultural endeavor.<sup>142</sup> For this reason, it requires a certain amount of careful vigilance.

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<sup>141</sup> Israel Galindo, *The Hidden Lives of Congregations: Discerning Church Dynamics* (Herndon, Virginia: Alban, 2004), 96.

<sup>142</sup> Actually, we might argue that integrating all gospel values are countercultural actions; integrating queer theological values simply ups the ante considerably.



The few core values that I have argued are decidedly queer in nature, include (a) affirming the goodness of human bodies in general and sexual bodies in particular, (b) privileging fluidity over fixity, and (c) living out a radical form of inclusivity and hospitality in the Christian community. These values are formed by queer experience and, in turn, influence the way queer people think theologically. We could appropriately argue that these values are sacred values that describe the character of God as well as the shape of a faith that urges humanity to become more God-like.

If a particular community's theology is queer in these and other ways, then these core queer theological values must find their expression in the community's lived experience. As mentioned above, these theological beliefs should become effective in that they have a tangible effect on the way members of the community live their lives. Further, they should have a tangible effect on the community's corporate life. In other words, in queer theological communities, the day-to-day practices of the community and individual members of it should noticeably exhibit the character of these values. Otherwise, to borrow from the author of James, queer faith without works (actions) is dead.

### Fissures in Integration: Indicators of the Problem

In her essay, "Attending to the Gaps between Beliefs and Practices," Amy Plantinga Pauw notes the "temptation [many people have] to turn to exemplary cases when talking about the relationship between beliefs and practices."<sup>143</sup> This is manifest in

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<sup>143</sup> Amy Plantinga Pauw, "Attending to the Gaps between Beliefs and Practices," in *Practicing Theology*, 33.



the desire to use examples of extraordinary alignment between belief and practice, when the actions of particular people or communities unquestioningly demonstrate integrity and force. However, she rightly argues that it might be just as, if not more, helpful to look at examples of disconnect between belief and practice.

There is ... something to be said for looking at efforts by less exemplary believers to bridge the troublesome gaps that keep reappearing in various ways between their beliefs and practices. Their struggles reveal the continual slippage and compromise that occur between these two central aspects of the religious life. ... The ordinary struggles of religious people lay bare the ligaments that hold beliefs and practices together. Their struggles reveal how easily these connections become strained and broken when admirable belief fails to nurture admirable practice, or when vibrant practice fails to stimulate vibrant belief.<sup>144</sup>

Believing that there is definite wisdom in this exhortation to attend to the gaps, I would like to explore some examples from my own experience in MCC churches, i.e., churches that may be considered at least implicitly as queer theological communities. Each example hopes to illustrate a disconcerting gap between a particular queer theological value and its lived expression.

Unless otherwise indicated, these examples come from my experience in the congregation where I serve as pastor. MCC of Northern Virginia (MCC NOVA) is a suburban congregation with approximately one hundred members, about forty percent men and sixty percent women in worship attendance, racially mixed but a large majority white and of European descent, more than sixty percent in some way LGBT-identified, intergenerational from infant to octogenarian with a median age between forty and sixty, generally highly educated, and predominantly middle to upper-middle class.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 33-34.

<sup>145</sup> These details are based on my general observations, not on any scientifically collected survey data.





## Affirming the Goodness of Bodies in General and Sexual Bodies in Particular

I have argued that a core value of queer theology is the affirmation of the goodness of the human body in general, and of sexual bodies, in particular. Metropolitan Community Churches have embraced this affirmation, which stands in contrast and tension with the body-denying and erotophobic ethos of much of Christian tradition. Additionally, MCC claims that one of its primary objectives is to “proudly bear witness to the holy integration of sexuality and spirituality.”<sup>146</sup> I have had several experiences in individual MCC congregations, however, that have indicated a rather wide gap between this communal belief and its ability to be expressed in specific lived experiences. One recent example from my own congregation should prove a sufficient illustration.

Earlier this year, we were hosting a regular social event called “First Fridays” on the first Friday of every month. At one such event, we showed the movie *Rent*, the 2005 film version of the Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award winning musical about Bohemians in the East Village of New York City struggling with life, love, poverty, drugs, sexuality, AIDS, and their impact on America.<sup>147</sup> There was a scene in which the character Mimi Marquez was dancing at her place of employment, an erotic dance club called the Cat Scratch Club. She sang a song called “Take Me Out Tonight” and her performance was fully embodied and sexually suggestive. At one point in the movie, I left the sanctuary where we were showing the movie, and I ran into one of my transgender members in the

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<sup>146</sup> Statement of Vision from MCC Strategic Plan, 2005, <http://www.mcccchurch.net/> (accessed October 30, 2006).

<sup>147</sup> Internet Movie Database Description of *Rent* (2005), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0294870/> (accessed October 30, 2006).



fellowship hall. She was seething with anger and told me that she was upset to the point of leaving the church because we were showing the film. She was particularly offended by the dance scene and indicated she thought it was “especially inappropriate to have anything suggesting sexuality present in the sanctuary.” It was the latter — the convergence of the holy (epitomized by the church sanctuary) and the embodied/sexual — that seemed to be the largest problem for her.

The incident was complex and layered with many different issues of history and personality, as most situations of conflict in churches are. I needn’t go into any in-depth exploration of these complexities. What I would like to lift up from this experience, however, is the way in which someone who has at least some investment in the values of queer theology so quickly retreated to the body-denying and erotophobic stance of her religious roots when it came to actually experiencing some affirmation of the body and sexuality in a spiritual context.<sup>148</sup> Even though she has publicly affirmed a desire to heal the division between body and soul and has participated in a number of educational events affirming sexuality — and specifically queer sexuality — as a gift from God, there was a noticeable gap between those aspirational theological beliefs and their practical application. This is illustrative of a fairly persistent gap in queer theological communities, in my observation, as unchecked expectations and assumptions come to the surface and bring with them the very attitudes and understandings about the body and sexuality we aspire to overcome. When “old tapes” get triggered in our minds that repeat the messages broadcast by mainstream religious authorities of our childhood and the

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<sup>148</sup> Though, admittedly, it wasn’t an overtly “spiritual” event — it was a social event for adults that was using our versatile common room that we also use for worship.



dominant culture at large, we come face to face with internalized oppressions rooted in the complex intersection of homophobia, sexism, racism, able-ism, and other embodied shame issues.

### Privileging Fluidity over Fixity

Metropolitan Community Churches were founded with a primary affirming theological understanding of gay men and lesbians, which acknowledges the failure of fixed categories of gender performance and sexual attraction to adequately represent the reality of our lives. Over the course of our history, we have also become more open to affirming bisexual and transgender persons, which further illustrates the fluidity of these categories. In my own congregation, we've done a lot of work on the issue of transgender inclusion and our understanding and acceptance has been stretched in recent years as more and more transgender persons have become active and vital members of our community. We have had community forums and panels with transsexuals, transvestites, and "gender queers" who do not identify as either male/female or who may move among and between these categories, maintaining an intentional sense of gender ambiguity. In the rare instances when we have gender-specific programming, we always include the words, "this group is open to any person *identifying as* male" or "any person *identifying as* female." This is why a recent conflict in my church, illustrative of yet another troubling gap between expressed belief and embodied action, caught me somewhat off guard.

My congregation has long been identified as a primarily female congregation. Women constitute a majority of those attending worship and activities. Additionally,





women have taken on most of the leadership roles. I've been doing intentional work to encourage, equip, and empower the men in the community to become more involved and to help us meet the unique needs of men for spirituality and communal relationships. Out of our intentional discussions around this issue, a core group of men expressed a desire for a men's Bible discussion group to meet monthly. We talked from the very beginning about how we could maintain our commitment to be trans-inclusive and still create gender-specific programming. We had explicit conversations about inviting all who identified as male, including some of the transmen in our congregation, to fully participate. I was taken aback when one of the leaders of this group told me of their decision to deny the request of one of our members who had asked to attend. The member in question told them s/he identified as male, yet the men in the group did not experience him as male and considered him, instead, to be a butch lesbian living in a lesbian relationship. (The group actually got together and voted about the person's gender and whether they "met the requirements" of the group, which is an entirely different problem!) My point is that even though the group had a theoretical understanding of the fluidity of gender, they weren't able to move beyond their own initial assumptions about a person's gender in order to allow her/him to self-identify. As much as we have talked about our conviction that ours will be a safe community that supports an individual's right to self-determination in these matters, including the creation of space for people to "try on" different gender identities on their journeys towards authenticity and wholeness, when the rubber met the road in this case, it skidded rather badly. An incongruence between belief and action once again became visible.



This issue of fluidity vs. fixity may be the greatest challenge for queer theological communities. Repeatedly, even as we have appreciated the wiggle room to define ourselves, our gendered bodies, and our relationships in ways that transgress heteronormative assumptions, we have failed to master an ability to live comfortably with ambiguity for long. We seem to long for things to be “pinned down” and we retreat to unchecked assumptions about the stability of gender and of relationship configurations. I shall return to this later, as this may require the most intentional work on the part of leaders of queer theological communities.

### Radical Inclusivity in Christian Community

Living out a radical inclusivity in Christian community is one of the core values of queer theology. It is also a central tenet of MCC congregations around the world. “Inclusion” is the first articulated “core value” of MCC, which is further elaborated to indicate that “Love is our greatest moral value and resisting exclusion is a primary focus of our ministry. We want to continue to be conduits of faith where everyone is included in the family of God, and where all parts of our being are welcomed at God’s table.”<sup>149</sup> Most local MCC congregations, including my own, have explicitly articulated this value in some way in their own definitional documents. We seek to emulate the life and witness of Jesus, who embraced the outcast and passionately advocated for the inclusion and honoring of society’s most marginalized and vulnerable. However, there exist

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<sup>149</sup> MCC's Core Values as outlined in Strategic Plan, <http://www.mcccchurch.net> (accessed October 30, 2006).



significant gaps between our articulated belief in inclusion as a core theological value and our practice of including all people.

Cindi Love, MCC's Executive Director, recently shared with my congregation one such example from her own experience.<sup>150</sup> Love served for a year as the first Pastor of MCC of Greater Dallas, a congregation that remained affiliated with MCC after our largest church, the Cathedral of Hope, voted to disaffiliate. The members who remained had a lot of work to do initially to define themselves as a congregation distinct from the Cathedral of Hope megachurch. Inclusivity remained at the core of their self-proclaimed identity. They claim that "inclusion and hospitality" are "their principle ethics."<sup>151</sup> Love described a significant gap, however, in their belief about the value of inclusivity and their ability to embody it in practice. At one point in time, as they were moving from building to building in search of a permanent meeting place, the church was located in an area very near to a high concentration of the city's homeless population. Love began inviting some of these people to participate in worship. Initially, the community accepted this without commentary. However, once several of the men accepted Cindi's invitation to sing in the choir not only for worship but also for some special holiday musical events, people began to protest. They complained that these homeless, primarily African-American men, "stunk" and that their presence was disruptive to the pleasant sense of "community" they had begun to enjoy. In subsequent conversations with members of the community who threatened to leave the church if these men remained, Love became

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<sup>150</sup> This example was shared with leaders of my church at a recent workshop on financial planning held on September 2, 2006.

<sup>151</sup> MCC of Greater Dallas "About Us", <http://www.mccgd.org/content/leadership.asp> (accessed October 30, 2006).





convinced that their objections were based in racist and classist assumptions and attitudes they were unwilling to acknowledge or critically examine.

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated occurrence. Several such examples could be given about a troublesome gap between the belief that radical inclusivity is a sacred imperative and the practice of actually welcoming all people. Specifically, this becomes evident at the intersection of other oppressions. Classism and racism may be the most common. Congregations of primarily middle to upper class, white gays and lesbians who are largely able to “fit in” to the existing systems of privilege in our society are often uneasy with racial diversity or easily detectable differences in socioeconomic status or class. Many MCC congregations also have difficulty when more fringe elements of queer community are visible, including transgender folks who don’t “pass” well, and those whose sexual relationships are not mere replicas of monogamous heterosexual unions with same-gender partners. For example, those who participate in BDSM or leather sexuality, or whose relationships are polyamorous by design, often threaten the unity of MCC congregations and find themselves less than fully welcomed. Attention must be given to helping integrate more fully the desire for radical inclusivity and its actuality in lived experience.

### Transforming the Gaps, Working for Integration

In using these illustrations of gaps between theological belief and praxis in MCC, I do not mean to imply that MCC congregations are necessarily worse than any other churches are at achieving “effective faith.” However, I do want to be honest about the specific work to which MCC congregations need to be attentive. In order to attend to



some of these gaps and help congregations become more integrated and authentic in their expression of queer theological values, the leaders of queer spiritual communities must be intentional about continually helping the congregation view their practices and corporate life through the lens of these values. “These gaps call for persistent critical analysis of the relations and misrelations between beliefs and practices.”<sup>152</sup> Pastors have a primary responsibility for making sure this happens. They must help draw attention to the gaps and invite members of the community to be critically self-reflective at the same time as they are creatively imaginative about the positive transformation present as such gaps become smaller. For the gaps are not only indicators of a problem, they are also indicators of potential. As Terry Veling writes,

What is a gap, except perhaps a space — a blank space, a space like that of the margin? A blank space represents a lack or an absence, yet it also represents a hunger or a search. It is as much about what is missing or excluded as it is about the hope or vision for what could be, for new possibility.<sup>153</sup>

Therefore, the practice of intentionally working for integrity in queer spiritual communities is a constructive, spiritual practice with the potential to transform communities and individual members of them in ways that are liberative and life-giving.

### Strategic Intentionality for Leaders

MCC pastors have the responsibility and the privilege of helping to develop and shape queer theological communities. Being intentional about working for integrity

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<sup>152</sup> Plantinga Pauw, 41.

<sup>153</sup> Terry A. Veling, *Living in the Margins: Intentional Communities and the Art of Interpretation* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1996), 18.



between queer theological values and embodied practice is a key strategic function of such pastoral leadership. In order to be intentional, I believe pastoral leaders must focus energy and attention on articulating queer theological values, drawing attention to the ways in which they are – and are not – being practiced, and continually stretching the limits of what is considered “normative” in order to make room for queer revelations to emerge from the sacred margins. Taking the core queer theological values that I have outlined as examples, I will briefly suggest some potential ways in which pastoral leaders might be intentional in each area.

### Bodily Celebration and Sexual Boldness

As much as talk about the “body” is central to Christian theology and ecclesiology, most of Christian tradition has treated our concrete physical bodies as something of an embarrassment. Christian theology often discusses the “body” of Christ, the church as “the body,” and “bodies” of theological knowledge. Yet, as Brazilian theologian Jaci Maraschin has suggested, these bodies “have usually been bodies without flesh, without bones or brains, bodies without nervous systems or blood,”<sup>154</sup> and as Marcella Althaus-Reid adds, “bodies without menstruation or sweat or without malnutrition or without sexual relationships.”<sup>155</sup> One of the tasks of queer theology — a theology that affirms the goodness of human bodies in general and sexual bodies in particular — is, as I have argued, to challenge the body-denying and erotophobic ethos of mainstream Christian tradition. As Justin Tanis writes:

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<sup>154</sup> Maraschin, as cited in Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 114.

<sup>155</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 114.





The aim of body theology is to examine our bodily experiences as the way in which we experience God. The only way that we know God is as embodied people. Through our bodies' capacities for sight, sound, emotion, thought, intuition, and other senses, we are able to experience the divine. The sacred comes to us through our bodies and within our bodies.... Our bodies are made in the image and likeness of God and are the only ways in which we experience the divine.<sup>156</sup>

We must begin by bringing our actual physical bodies back into the church and into the fullness of our spiritual experience. Pastors of queer churches should talk about the sacredness of bodies and about the variety of our particular bodies, including queer bodies.

However, as essential as explicit talk about the body is, it is not enough. Queer churches should be centers for the celebration of human embodiment. Bodies should be present in worship, not as the embarrassing husks for our spirits that we must necessarily bring with us, but as proud instruments of our praise and devotion. Pastors can help their communities reclaim an embodied spirituality by making room for the body to be celebrated. Worship, as one of the central corporate experiences, should include sacred dance, liturgical movement, body prayers, and sacred rituals that include touch. Pastors of queer churches will likely find this level of bodily celebration and integration in spiritual life to be welcomed by a majority of parishioners. However, when they push further to a celebration of the particularities of queer bodies, they may face more challenges.

MCC churches should be places where queer bodies can be acknowledged, explored, and celebrated for their particularity. To note a couple of examples that have been problematic for some congregations, transgender bodies and bodies with HIV/AIDS

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<sup>156</sup> Tanis, 164.



should be explicitly brought into the light in queer spiritual communities as images of the divine. As Tanis writes about the importance of a trans-inclusive body theology, he says:

Transgendered bodies are the source of our pleasure and our pain, a sign of our incongruity and our internal unity. We may struggle with our bodies, rejoice in our bodies, weep over the parts present or the parts absent, see our bodies as a prison and live to view them as a source of our liberation. Trans bodies are often changing bodies, bodies that hold more than one essence, transitional bodies and transformational bodies.<sup>157</sup>

It is essential for queer spiritual communities to be places that celebrate transgender bodies in their various configurations. Pastors can help make this happen, for example, by including transgender bodies as examples in their preaching and teaching, empowering transgender persons to share their body stories in the community, and by creating meaningful corporate rituals to honor body transitions.

Bodies with HIV/AIDS must also be explicitly acknowledged and honored in queer spiritual communities. “Although many diseases plague humankind,” writes Jim Mitulski, “HIV is unique in that the disease is religiously stigmatized, and it affects religiously stigmatized people.”<sup>158</sup> While HIV/AIDS is indiscriminating in its affect on all people, in the disease’s history it has tended to be associated with those whose sexuality is non-heteronormative, or more specifically, with gay men. Because HIV/AIDS affects the church as the “body of Christ” and the queer church to an even greater extent, it is imperative that MCC congregations honestly and openly affirm the goodness of bodies with HIV/AIDS. Pastors can help congregations do this, for example,

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>158</sup> Jim Mitulski, “Ezekiel Understands AIDS, AIDS Understands Ezekiel, or Reading the Bible with HIV,” in *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*, ed. Robert E. Goss and Mona West (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 153-154.



by addressing HIV/AIDS in their preaching and teaching, by including specific prayers for a cure for HIV/AIDS, by empowering those infected or affected by HIV/AIDS to tell their own bodily stories (including the candid realities of living with HIV and the embodied challenges of managing side effects from HIV medications), and by joining with other agencies serving those with HIV/AIDS in collaborative partnerships.

Queer theology is also a *sexual* body theology, a theology of bodies in love. To bring sexual bodies back into the life of the church requires a sexual boldness on the part of pastors. And pastors can face enormous challenges as they claim this responsibility. For as much as Christianity has been shaped by the body-denying strains in its tradition, the effects of erotophobia are even more deeply entrenched. Pastor's who dare to talk openly about sex, especially the realities of the diverse sexual lives queer people lead, will face push-back if not downright hostility from those who cannot separate sex from shame. However, queer theology insists that sexuality is a good gift from God and that our sexual relationships are indeed avenues for discovering and experiencing the divine. Queer theologian Marcella Althaus-Reed insists that, "In queer theology, the grounding of the theological reflection lies in human relationships for ... it is in scenes of intimacy and the epistemology provided by those excluded from the political heterosexual project in theology that unveilings of God may occur."<sup>159</sup> One of the things pastors can do is to "highlight the 'ordinariness' of love and sexuality" and to create safe places where people can be honest about their own sexual experiences.<sup>160</sup> It can be especially helpful in queer

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<sup>159</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 114.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.





theological communities to open up a dialogue about sexual ethics that does justice to the reality of our lives and helps us navigate systems for relating ethically with one another that *are not* bogged down in heterosexism and *are* rooted in justice-love.<sup>161</sup>

### Making Peace with Liminality

As I mentioned previously, I believe one of the most significant challenges for the leaders of queer spiritual communities lies in their calling to nurture community and spiritual growth amidst the perpetual presence of ambiguity. By and large, people are not comfortable with ambiguity or uncertainty for long. This is obviously a challenge for queer spiritual communities since fluidity is a core queer theological value and change a constant organizational characteristic. Helping the community navigate this tension requires a commitment on the part of pastors and leaders to resist the full force of the centralizing, normalizing, and stabilizing tendencies present in congregations. It further requires them to nurture and utilize the transformational power of liminality.

Building on the work of Arnold van Gennep concerning rites of passage, Victor Turner understood liminality to refer to an intermediary condition, something that is neither here nor quite there. For example, in rites of passage there is an initial step in which a person leaves his/her old state of life, then the liminal stage where s/he exists “betwixt and between,” before a final stage when s/he receives a new status and is reincorporated. Turner “argues that liminality is not simply a negative period of privation, but rather a powerful spiritual experience in its own right. It is a sort of seed-

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<sup>161</sup> Marvin M. Ellison, *Erotic Justice: A Liberating Ethic of Sexuality* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 4.



bed for spiritual, artistic, and cultural creativity.”<sup>162</sup> Pastors have a particular role to play in helping congregations experience the creative potential of liminality. Timothy Carson argues:

The religious leader is strategically positioned, both in terms of specific roles within faith communities and also by virtue of a particular theological worldview, to be an extremely important ritual guide to individuals, groups and social and ecclesial systems upon entrance into liminal states within passages. The pastoral leader may approach liminal reality with unique fields of meaning which are frequently more applicable to liminal reality than those of other schools of thought.<sup>163</sup>

This is all the more true of pastors of queer spiritual communities because liminality *is* the essence of queer; it is the space between identities if not the disruptor of identities, and it is a constant characteristic of queer church. This liminal characteristic of queer communities, if it can be nurtured and people can make peace with living in it for extended periods of time, is one of its richest sources of spiritual depth, vitality, and meaning. The liminal stage is

the most power-laden time for transformation ... one of departure from structure or homeostasis, wherein expectations may be challenged, unspeakable subjects discussed and new roles tested. This may include an experimental playfulness and freedom with roles, thoughts, and behavior which are uncharacteristic of those found in ongoing structural relationships.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> H. Boone Porter Jr., “Liminal Mysteries: Some Writings by Victor Turner,” *Anglican Theological Review* 57, no. 2 (April 1975): 215.

<sup>163</sup> Timothy L. Carson, “Liminal Reality and Transformational Power: Pastoral Interpretation and Method,” *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 7 (Summer 1997): 105.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.



Because queer spiritual communities are liminal communities, they have a unique potential to tap into this power, and I believe it represents the greatest gift the queer church offers the broader church and world.

An egalitarian community free from the oppressive forces of heterosexism, racism, classism, and other forms of oppression that tend to spoil and corrupt Christian community can at least come into vision through liminal queer experience. A special camaraderie develops between those sharing liminal space and experience, which Turner calls “*communitas*. ”

This is a bond which transcends any socially established differentiations. Those who share the liminal passage develop a community of the inbetween. A significant sharing of the liminal passage creates strong egalitarian ties which level out differences in status and station which have been established by structure.”<sup>165</sup>

The creation of this type of community, which we might rightly argue is the eschatological hope for the church, should not be underestimated as a positive potential of queer spiritual communities. Pastoral leaders should be mindful of this potential and intentionally work to foster engagement in liminal relationships and practices that will nurture it.

On a very basic practical level, for example, pastors may help the community explore the assumptions about gender that they make about one another. Systemic anxiety can be expressed when, for example, those previously understood as male or female decide to explore a different gender expression from androgyny to gender-queer to male-to-female (MTF) or female-to-male (FTM) transsexual. If education about transgender issues has been consistently present in a congregation and transgender

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 101.





persons are active in the life of the community, this anxiety can be lessened. However, it should be noted that, generally speaking, congregations will be more comfortable with those who fully transition or identify as transgender than with those who claim and occupy a space in between or who choose not to disclose their stories of gender transition. The tendency to normalize and create fixed categories by which one can label oneself or others once-and-for-all is a constant challenge for marginal communities. Pastors can aid congregations if they will intentionally stand with them in the margins and provide a non-anxious presence. They can also help slow the normalizing tendency if they will consistently and openly queer (i.e., the verb meaning to subvert, spoil, or challenge) the formation of attitudes or structures based in fixity. This has application not only for matters of gender and sexuality, but also for broader ecclesial issues.

In his book about intentional communities, Terry Veling describes the marginal nature of intentional Christian communities. While I doubt he had churches such as MCC in mind, I believe his description is incredibly applicable to the nature of queer spiritual communities.

Marginal Christian communities recognize that there are many ways in which the center no longer holds in their experience of tradition and society. They challenge dominant orderings of patriarchy in their quest for renewed feminist expression; they seek more inclusive and participatory structures over against hierarchical and clericalized structures; they turn their attention to ecological issues in the face of an overly technologized world; they are concerned with the causes of indigenous and Third World cultures in the face of dominant Euro-centric traditions. They are seeking alternate theologies, spiritualities, and practices casting their ‘voice from the margins over the whole social-symbolic order, questioning its rules, terms, procedures, and practices.’”<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Veling, 11.



Indeed, this language resonates with MCC's strategic plan and future vision. MCC also fits the description of a community whose "critical attention is directed largely at the alienation they experience from the institutional church."<sup>167</sup> Metropolitan Community Churches were birthed as communities in exile from mainstream Christianity, which excluded sexual/gender outsiders in degrees varying from patronizing tolerance to spiritual and physical violence. MCC churches remain marginal, in some contexts by choice due to their commitment to *queer* spirituality, and in other contexts by their uniqueness in offering a welcoming spiritual home to LGBT people. Thus, MCC congregations "exercise what Edward Schillebeeckx calls 'a loyal opposition' or 'provisional illegality' with respect to the institutional church's current disciplines and structures."<sup>168</sup> However, here also there is a tendency to centralize and normalize. Unfortunately, MCC congregations will often do the difficult work to deconstruct theologies and systems that exclude their members on the basis of a gay or lesbian identity, only to reconstruct theologies and systems that exclude other marginalized people. Which leads me to the final strategic issue for pastoral leadership, that of developing and nurturing a radical inclusivity and hospitality in Christian community.

### Widening the Welcome — Nurturing Radical Inclusivity and Hospitality

Radical inclusivity is a core queer theological value, and the act of resisting exclusion in all its forms is a stated goal of MCC.<sup>169</sup> However, we have yet to

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<sup>167</sup> Schillebeeckx, as quoted in Veling, 11.

<sup>168</sup> Veling, 11.

<sup>169</sup> Statement of Vision from MCC Strategic Plan, 2005, <http://www.mcccchurch.net/> (accessed October 30, 2006).



completely embody this in our congregational lives. Whether it's because we get too comfortable with who's "in" the community and simply neglect to reach out to others, or because we have unchecked prejudices that send implicit or explicit messages of rejection to others based on their actual or perceived race, gender or sexual expression, relationship configuration, class, or economic status; there are gaps between our desired form of radical inclusivity/hospitality and our practice. Pastors can do queer spiritual communities a great service simply by naming this reality and asking questions like "Who isn't here?" or "What would our reaction be if someone from our neighborhood<sup>170</sup> with little in common with us arrived?" Asking the questions and inviting people to bring both their reality and their imagination into conversation with their core value of inclusivity can be a wonderful strategy for weaving the connections between belief and action.

There is also a big difference between diverse people inhabiting the same physical space for an hour or two on Sunday morning and the same people having a genuine sense of community. Our core queer theological value of inclusivity insists on both of these things being true. In order to nurture community between diverse people, the leaders of queer spiritual communities have to create opportunities for relationship building. One significant way of doing this is to provide space for and encourage people to participate in sharing their stories. Yvette Flunder writes:

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<sup>170</sup> It is quite common for MCC congregations, because of our outreach, to be disconnected from our actual geographical communities. People come to us as chosen community generally because they are seeking queer community. The example used earlier in this paper about MCC Greater Dallas and the homeless population surrounding their meeting place illustrates a troublesome disconnect with the struggle and experience of other marginalized people in our neighborhoods who are not "us."





I have found that it is of vital importance that people who have been silent and silenced far too long be given an opportunity to give voice to their struggle. Secrets kill and silence often equals death. People often speak forth the answers to their own issues as they talk it out in a supportive environment. It also has a purgative effect on the teller of the story. Shadows are no longer threatening when the light shines on them; when the secret is exposed, the demon is uncovered and rendered powerless. The experiences that at one time horrified now become a resource from which to draw life, both for the teller and the listener. In order for a community to share in each other's failures and triumphs, occasions must be provided for testifying and sharing ... even those things that appear obvious.<sup>171</sup>

Beyond the benefits Flunder describes so well, this type of storytelling creates an opportunity for people to connect around the realities of their lives and build relationships that are mutually respectful, understanding, and supportive. Really hearing the experience of someone unlike us is often the very thing that opens our minds and our hearts to connect with them in solidarity. This is demonstrated well in the recurrent testimony of those who have changed their minds about gay and lesbian issues only after a close friend "came out" to them about their own sexual orientation. The same is true, in my experience, of those with no understanding of transgender experience when they actually listen to a transgender person describe their life and struggle for authenticity.

Another thing that the pastoral leader of a queer spiritual community can do is to help the congregation develop a welcoming atmosphere for those not yet included in the community. For example, in his chapter about creating a genuine welcome for trans people in communities of faith, Justin Tanis argues that intentionality and planning are key. "You want to convey to transgendered people that we are both expected and welcomed at your community."<sup>172</sup> This means that education of the community has to

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<sup>171</sup> Flunder, 39.

<sup>172</sup> Tanis, 122.



come first. Before they can be truly inclusive, the community must have an enlightened understanding of gender issues and the instability of fixed gender identities. They must be ready to use appropriate language, including pronouns that match a person's current or preferred gender presentation. They must have planned ahead to have bathrooms and programs that are accessible to the gender-variant (options for "men" and "women" leave out many). They should have in place explicitly welcoming policies or statements that refer to the transgendered. The same can be true for any other group of people that the church wishes to make welcome.

Inclusivity can be challenging for the community when their comfort zones are stretched and when they are forced to confront their own prejudices. Pastoral care for those who are struggling with the demands of inclusive community should not be neglected as a powerful way of helping the community integrate its desire for equality and inclusion with its practice. Pastors should be attentive to the struggles people are having, initiate safe conversations where they can honestly admit the nature of their resistance, and pray for understanding and tolerance when these aren't coming easily. To "naturalize" the growing pains that come along with boundary crossing can be an affirming pastoral function that then frees people to live through the growing pain rather than retreat from it and/or avoid dealing with it altogether.

There is also great power in the rites and sacraments of the church to help a spiritual community envision and live into its nature as radically inclusive Christian community. In MCC, the sacrament of communion is perhaps the best example of this. The eucharist provides an open table where none are excluded from full participation as their most authentic selves. The communion table is the great equalizer where there is no



first and last, no least and greatest, and where there is “enough bread and enough love for all.”<sup>173</sup> These ritual elements have a tremendous potential to create meaning and to expand the understanding of who is included in the community of faith. Pastors can use their creative imaginations to imbue these sacraments with teaching and transforming power that helps the community live into its best vision of itself.

### Further Implications for MCC

If theology is to mean anything at all, then our theological thinking — our beliefs about God and about faith — must find their fullest expression in our actions — the day-to-day practices in which we engage as individual people of faith and as corporate spiritual communities. A primary responsibility of leaders of spiritual communities is to help them attend to this integrity between belief and praxis. In queer spiritual communities, this means helping the congregation, and individual members of it, articulate core queer theological values and translate those values into actions that embody them. This requires a careful intentionality on the part of spiritual leaders, a willingness to stretch the congregation far enough (but not too far) to attend to the gaps that exist between their belief and their praxis, and to shape the sort of community that is more integral. While this is a challenging task, if leaders are willing to take on their responsibility to be intentional about it, there is tremendous potential for the community and individual members of it to experience a spiritual transformation with benefits that

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<sup>173</sup> Edgard Danielsen-Morales uses this phrase to describe the fundamental needs as imagined in the Eucharist. He is informed by the work of Latin American liberation theologian Elsa Tamez. Personal communication, December 21, 2007.





extend far beyond themselves. If MCC congregations are to be queer spiritual communities that claim the blessing of marginality,<sup>174</sup> then MCC pastors must develop particular skills as body theologians adept at helping people make peace with liminality, and who will hospitably invite into that creatively charged spiritual space the most inclusive mix of people. Perhaps most basically, this requires leaders to be knowledgeable about the dynamics of change and confident about leading congregations through cycles of change. It is to this important task that we will now turn.

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<sup>174</sup> The MCC Strategic Plan articulates this clearly in saying, “In the margins, we are blessed.” Statement of Purpose from MCC Strategic Plan, 2005, <http://www.mccchurch.net/> (accessed October 30, 2006).



## CHAPTER 4:

### LEADING CONGREGATIONAL CHANGE IN QUEER CHURCHES

Dealing with change is one of the most difficult and persistent challenges facing church communities. When change takes place, regardless of how welcome the change is or how well it is managed, it can be easily guaranteed that a certain number of people are likely to leave the community, either for the duration of the most tense period of the change process or permanently. If this is true for faith communities in general, it is exponentially truer for queer churches. The very nature of queer church, which I have elsewhere described in detail, is to be a community in a perpetual state of significant and intentional change. Many of the characteristics people find most difficult about change — such as the presence of ambiguity and the destabilization of previously “known” or presumed essential structures, identities, or roles — are core values and/or intentional disciplines of queer churches. Consequently, it is essential for effective pastors of queer spiritual communities to understand the dynamics of change and to develop skills at leading change in the congregation. In this chapter, I will explore some of the characteristics of change as it is experienced individually and corporately through the specific lens of MCC. I will then attempt to describe some practical skills that pastors might develop to increase their effectiveness at leading change.

One of the reasons that change is such a constant challenge for MCC is that we aspire to be countercultural, intentionally marginal communities that exist in a constant state of active resistance to the status quo of our society. This resistance is motivated by the fact that the status quo of our society is upheld by unjust power structures and policies that privilege certain people by neglecting or oppressing others. I would argue that this



resistance is a fundamental calling for Christian communities in general; however, most churches fall significantly short of realizing these aspirations. For example, nearly every mainstream Christian denomination today is embroiled in heated discussions about the question of whether or not (and to what degree<sup>175</sup>) to openly welcome and affirm gay men and lesbians in the community — debates that include very real threats of schism, if not active follow-through on these threats from those unwilling to continue the dialogue. This reality is rooted in resistance to change, specifically a change from the norms enforced by the hetero-patriarchal system of domination. For MCC, this debate predates our history. We can confidently say that we have moved further on the journey of liberation in this regard, to a place where we have decided that we will not only welcome and affirm individuals who self-identify as gay men and lesbians, but that we will proudly celebrate the sacred gift of sexual love and commitment between people of the same gender.<sup>176</sup> Even further, we have decided that we will welcome and celebrate bisexual people, transgender people, intersex people, and those who identify as queer.

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<sup>175</sup> These open and affirming movements are known by many names: More Light in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., ONA in the United Church of Christ, Reconciling in the United Methodist Church, Welcoming & Affirming in the American Baptist Church, etc. Most of them are minority movements on the margins of these mainstream denominations, and are often not even considered legitimate by the power structure. Further, there are degrees to which churches who consider themselves open and affirming will include LGBT people. It is sometimes the case that gay men and lesbians who are in active relationships will not be accepted as full members of the church or will not be permitted to participate in various official lay leadership capacities. It is often the case that gay men and lesbians will not be considered suitable candidates for ordination, and even in those churches that do ordain openly gay or lesbian people, there are few local congregations that will actually call these individuals as pastor. It is almost always the case that these open and affirming churches will not perform official marriages or blessings of same-sex relationships. And, perhaps even more universally, these communities will be much less tolerant of openly bisexual people, transgender people (especially those who don't "pass" well), and people on the margins of queer community such as members of the pan-sexual leather community or those in open or polyamorous relationships.

<sup>176</sup> The nuance here is significant, as some churches only welcome self-identified, but "non-practicing" or celibate, gay men or lesbians.





Many of our churches have also made the commitment to create communities inclusive of those whose expressions of sexuality are non-normative in other ways and whose relationship configurations and covenants are neither monogamous nor binary. All of these commitments are radically countercultural to the dominant norms in the United States, and queer churches can be proud of these aspirations and the instances in which we have successfully lived into them. However, as I have discussed in previous chapters, we also fall short of them when we encounter within ourselves the very prejudices that have wounded us, prejudices that result from our own enculturation in the norms of our racist, classist, sexist, and heterosexist society. It makes sense that change in the form of shifting away from these various -isms, which the dominant systems and structures of both church and society seek to monitor and reinforce at every turn, would require significant and sustained effort. Yet, this is a task central to the calling and purpose of queer churches, as I understand them. In order to successfully coach, companion, and inspire churches to make these kinds of changes, pastors must become effective change leaders.

### Some Dynamics of Adaptive Change in MCC

Frequently, in periods of frustration when the tension of living with change and ambiguity become too great, church members will often come to the pastor demanding s/he do something to “fix” whatever they perceive is wrong or broken. Unfortunately, few (if any) of the challenges that need to be addressed in order to create authentic and inclusive queer congregations have any quick fix, nor are they challenges that can be met by the pastor alone. Rather, they are complicated and lengthy processes of change that



require constant evaluation, adaptation, and innovation in the community as a whole. In their excellent book on this topic, Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky categorize these types of changes as “adaptive challenges.” They write:

There are a whole host of problems that are not amenable to authoritative expertise or standard operating procedures. They cannot be solved by someone who provides answers from on high. We call these adaptive challenges because they require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places within the organization or community. Without learning new ways — changing attitudes, values, behaviors — people can not make the adaptive leap necessary to thrive in the new environment. The sustainability of change depends on having the people with the problem internalize the change itself.<sup>177</sup>

This is precisely the type of challenge that I believe is most common in MCC congregations, specifically as we make the attempt to become authentic queer communities. The challenges confronting queer churches are adaptive because we envision a type of radically inclusive and egalitarian community that does not yet exist, and we must intentionally deconstruct the normative and normalizing structures of dominant culture (e.g., sexism, erotophobia, biologically determined gender polarity, heterosexism, racism, classism, etc.), which are insidious, complicated, and systemic. This requires us to experiment, make new discoveries, and equip numerous facets of the community to make adjustments, change attitudes and behaviors, and be intentionally reflective in examining deeply ingrained beliefs, prejudices, and previously unquestioned assumptions about what is valuable, ethical, and moral.

Adaptive challenges are not easy to make, for individuals or for organizations. This is part of the reason people resist these types of changes, even when they are

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<sup>177</sup> Ronald A. Heifetz and Martin Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 13.



changes necessary to bring about what those who resist them most long for. As Heifetz and Linsky explain, “Adaptive change stimulates resistance because it challenges people’s habits, beliefs, and values.”<sup>178</sup> In queer communities, this resistance is increased by a couple of intersecting factors. First, we are rewarded with privileges, affirmation, and legitimization (from institutional and cultural authorities) for continuing the very habits, beliefs, and values we want to see changed. Secondly, the alternative habits, beliefs, and values we hope will replace existing norms are often deemed sinful or immoral by society at large, our friends and families whose opinions matter to us, and even our own internal voices. Additionally, all adaptive change “asks [people] to take a loss, experience uncertainty, and even express disloyalty to people and cultures. Because adaptive change forces people to question and perhaps redefine aspects of their identity, it also challenges their sense of competence.”<sup>179</sup> Heifetz and Linsky are correct when they observe, “Loss, disloyalty, and feeling incompetent: That’s a lot to ask. No wonder people resist.”<sup>180</sup> It is important for MCC pastors to acknowledge that people are risking a great deal in the effort to create queer spiritual communities and to treat with respect and sensitivity the feelings that result from that risking.

Let me provide an example that builds on one offered in the previous chapter and which engages a number of these aspects of change theory. My congregation embraces the core value of inclusivity that is held in common by MCC congregations around the world and which is a core queer theological value. We further describe what we mean by

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.





this with the claim that “We commit ourselves by word and deed to dismantle barriers between individuals and between individuals and God.”<sup>181</sup> One of the aspects of inclusion that we have attempted to work for in the past several years is the issue of including transgender members. I earlier described some of the ways we have attempted to remove structural and attitudinal barriers for our transgender members. However, we occasionally fall short of our own best efforts when we confront within ourselves sexism and transphobia characterized most fundamentally by an extraordinary discomfort with ambiguity. I was recently approached by a member of the community who said in exasperation, “We’re not inclusive like we say we want to be.” Internally, I thought, “You’re absolutely right about that; what are *you* going to do about it?” Instead, I asked her to sit down with me to discuss some examples of specific situations that we might be able to address together. She reminded me about her partner’s experience of being excluded by the men’s discussion group.<sup>182</sup> Additionally, this couple is adopting two young children who have begun calling the woman’s partner “Daddy,” because the partner’s self understanding is as a “father figure” in their lives. This has also met with some disapproval from other members of the community who are uncomfortable with the transgression of same-sex parental norms<sup>183</sup> that this type of role identification implies. Some women have protested this and indicated they thought it was “too confusing” for

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<sup>181</sup> “Core Values,” Metropolitan Community Church of Northern Virginia.

<sup>182</sup> See pages 67-8 for the full explanation of this case study.

<sup>183</sup> It is important to note that there are normalizing tendencies within any homogenized group of people. The desire for clear boundaries and easy categorization is one that leads to a certain stability people find comforting. LGBT couples are far from being immune to creating their own systems of domination that further exclude and marginalize others.



the boys. Ironically, this is the very same claim that had been leveled at the primary complainant many years ago when she and her same-sex partner had children, though at that time it was because people thought it was confusing for her children to have two women as parents. Incidentally, they found (as do most parents of whatever gender and sexual orientation) that being good parents has more to do with the quality of love, nurture, and support they are able to provide than any personal characteristic they may or may not have. Nevertheless, the reaction of this woman who objected to the use of the word “Daddy” illustrates the insidious nature of gender rigidity and relational normativity.

Several aspects of this situation are worthy of comment. It is noticeable that the woman who initially approached me had identified a problem, wanted a solution, and wanted me to both discover what that solution was and implement it. She was looking for a technical fix to an adaptive challenge. Initially, she also wanted to give this work to me — the authority figure — rather than take on any responsibility herself for working on the solution. This response is common, as Heifetz and Linsky note,

People expect you to get right in there and fix things, to take a stand and resolve the problem. After all, that is what people in authority are paid to do. When you fulfill their expectations, they will call you admirable and courageous, and this is flattering. But challenging their expectations of you requires even more courage.<sup>184</sup>

It is indeed tempting to try to fix problems like this and thus demonstrate one’s competency as a leader. However, because this is not a problem with a technical fix, trying to offer one is counterproductive. “By trying to solve adaptive challenges for

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 127.



people, at best you will reconfigure it as a technical problem and create some short-term relief. But the issue will not have gone away. It will surface again.”<sup>185</sup> In this instance, it was important for me to listen, to explore some potential ways to begin addressing the immediate problem, and to make some observations about the larger and more systemic issues of sexism and transphobia that perpetuate the types of attitudes and behaviors that were clearly not inclusive.<sup>186</sup> It was also important that I was able to “give the work back” to this woman, her partner, and the larger community. Not that I would be a disinterested or detached party. On the contrary, I will and have been very involved; however, solving the larger adaptive challenge is work that can only be done collaboratively. I will later return to a more detailed discussion of leadership style, which values collaboration as a primary relational resource.

In the case of the mens’ discussion group, it is also interesting to note the multiple levels of privilege that must be deconstructed. The group is fairly homogenously comprised of white, upper-middle class men who identify as gay males. The primary common obstacle they have faced on their spiritual journeys has to do with the heterosexism they have encountered in the church and society. I believe they would identify this as the -ism that has marginalized and wounded them. They sought out the community of MCC first and foremost because they wanted to find a community that would radically welcome and celebrate them as gay men. The privilege of heterosexism was thus the privilege they needed to deconstruct in order to find a comfortable place for

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>186</sup> Chapter 6 of Heifetz and Linsky contains a detailed and very helpful discussion of how to give the work back, which includes strategies of “making observations, asking questions, offering interpretations, and taking actions.” I will return to this discussion later in this paper. Ibid., 123-139.





themselves to participate most authentically in the church. It is important to note that this urge, originating out of self-interest, is natural. Most of us find our primary actions determined by a care/concern for ourselves or those we love. That having been said, we can also observe that oppressed people who achieve this objective too often stop their deconstruction of privilege and resistance to the oppression of the marginalized after this feat has been achieved for themselves. For example, white, upper-middle-class, gay men do not, on the whole, immediately think they need to notice or resist sexism,<sup>187</sup> racism, classism, or transphobia.

At this point, it may be helpful to explore briefly how privilege functions. There are many layers to the privileges we are granted by hetero-patriarchal society based on a number of factors, including our gender (male is judged better than female, congruity between biological sex and gender identity is judged better than incongruity, stability at one end of the male-female spectrum is judged better than somewhere in the middle), our economic status (richer is judged better than poorer), the pigmentation of our skin (lighter is judged better in most racialized systems), our nationality, our sexual orientation (heterosexual is judged better than homosexual, homosexual is often judged better than bisexual), our physical appearance and ability (pretty is judged better than ugly — though what determines this is highly dependent on culture, able-bodied is judged preferable to having a disability), partnership status (monogamous and married are generally judged

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<sup>187</sup> Ironically, it is often the case that gay men are judged most harshly for their transgression of *gender* norms (e.g. acting in ways that are more feminine than masculine, or becoming a passive or receptive party in the act of sexual intercourse, which is traditionally viewed as the role appropriate for a woman.) Sexism and misogyny may indeed be *the* foundation for what we commonly refer to as “homophobia.” This is not, in my experience, something that gay men are automatically aware of, though many of them who have come to understand themselves as feminists are quite adept at exploring the nuanced relationship between these intersecting oppressions.



better than single, polyamorous, or promiscuous), etc. These intersecting privileges have been described as pyramids or hierarchies of privilege, though they are much more chaotically interconnected than a linear or hierarchical system suggests. It is not always the case that someone who may deconstruct one or more of these privileges is necessarily aware of how others of them function. And it is also the case that those of us who are enculturated in a society based on all of these privileges have internalized all of them to some extent. We may or may not choose to act on them, but we must acknowledge their presence and persistent, subtle power.

I mentioned earlier that white, upper-middle-class, gay men do not automatically think they need to deconstruct racism, sexism, classism, or transphobia. In drawing attention to this matter, I do not in any way mean to judge these men more harshly than any other segment of humanity. I could just as easily discuss the ways in which white, upper-middle-class, lesbian women do not automatically think they need to recognize, understand, or actively resist classism, transphobia, or the unique ways in which homophobia functions in the lives of gay men. Or the ways in which some transgender people continue to make strong moral judgments against gays and lesbians. However, I use the example of white, upper-middle-class, gay men because this is the primary constituency of our mens' discussion group, and the presenting problem of them excluding the male-identified person in question brings these issues of intersecting oppressions to the surface. I cannot overstate how central this dynamic is to the creation of queer spiritual communities. Overcoming the complex intersection of oppressions is probably the largest adaptive challenge we face in MCC. We will not be able to become the type of communities we know we are called to be — radically inclusive, egalitarian,





hospitable, and spiritually vibrant communities — unless we remain vigilant about monitoring and managing the adaptive challenges that arise when we encounter our own prejudices and the exclusive attitudes and behaviors they promote. In this specific case, some observations need to be made and explored that draw these connections and point out the gap between the groups' aspirational objectives and their apparent inability to successfully achieve them.

To provide one additional example on this same general topic, I have another transgender member who has recently begun her real life test, i.e., the time when her gender presentation will more closely than ever before match her self-understanding and she will present female in nearly every facet of her life. Prior to her coming out in this way, she had a male name and presented male in our congregation; I was the only one who knew she identified as transgender. Presenting male, she participated actively in a small group educational series we were facilitating at this time. A number of weeks ago, she began participating with her new chosen name and a female gender presentation. I was aware that this change was perceived by some other members of the class as disorienting. Primarily, I think it invoked their feelings of incompetency. They wanted to trust their intuition that this was the same person they had known and engaged with for weeks, and they had doubts and questions they weren't sure how to raise. They felt silly and anxious that they would make a mistake by using the wrong name or slipping up on a pronoun. It was destabilizing because they intuitively felt like the dynamics of the group had changed, yet there was no change in the personalities around the table. Because I was unaware that she was making her debut on this particular evening, I improvised a strategy to help the group live through this change in the short term. I hoped also, and





perhaps most importantly, to ensure that this experience was an empowering and affirming one for our courageous transgender sister. My strategy was to model an appropriate use of language by warmly greeting her by her chosen name, and by finding a way to naturally use a sentence in which I could refer to her in the third person and thereby model correct (feminine) pronoun usage. This seemed to be effective at addressing these particular issues of concern. It is important to note that they were short-term technical fixes about subjects of anxiety in other class members, but they were only minor aspects of the larger adaptive challenge we face in becoming a truly trans-inclusive group. As Heifetz and Linsky note, most significant changes involve both technical fixes and adaptive challenges.<sup>188</sup> Strategically dealing with the technical aspects of the problem well can buy leaders time to help the organization deal with the more challenging adaptive aspects.<sup>189</sup> Interestingly, the following week in the class, this person newly in transition was not present. Feeling somewhat more free to explore her discomfort with this change, one woman in the group confessed that she had thought she dealt with her transphobia and her discomfort with people in gender transition many years ago when she came to know and love another transwoman in the community. However, she admitted that she was now feeling similar feelings of resistance to gender change in this circumstance. Part of the reason for her renewed resistance is due to the fact that this particular transperson brings her two children to church. To her credit, the woman who was feeling uncomfortable was able to recognize some unchecked biases she had, not about whether it was appropriate for someone to make a gender transition, but

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 18.



about the fitness of a transperson to be a parent. She was also able to articulate the fact that she did not like to admit this judgmentalism about herself, and that she was eager to explore this as an opportunity to challenge herself to become more inclusive.

The example of transgender inclusion is only one example of many possible that provides a glimpse into the complex adaptive changes facing MCC congregations which aspire to become radically inclusive queer spiritual communities. However, it is one of the best examples available, because it very quickly illustrates the types of prejudices, attitudes, and behaviors that must be challenged in order for congregations to live into their core values and best vision of themselves. Deconstructing the myriad normativities monitored and reinforced by the white, hetero-patriarchal traditions of our church and society is a huge task, and yet it is perhaps the foundational and most persistent task of queer church, as I understand it.

### Leadership Styles and Strategies

Earlier, I mentioned my conviction that solving the larger adaptive challenges facing MCC is work that can only be done collaboratively. This recognition becomes extraordinarily important in determining appropriate leadership styles and strategies. It seems important to note at the beginning of this discussion that there are a number of different leadership styles, many of which have a lot to do with personality type and individual experience. I do not intend to say that there is only one leadership style or set of strategies appropriate for leaders in MCC. However, I do want to explore some aspects of leadership styles and strategies that might be important for pastors in MCC to incorporate into their repertoire. Because adaptive challenges are complex challenges



that a leader cannot fix from on high with a technical remedy, leading change in a congregation requires more mutual and collaborative strategies of leadership than typically encouraged by more traditional (and patriarchal<sup>190</sup>) understandings of how to exercise pastoral authority. Heifetz and Linsky put it this way:

In mobilizing adaptive work, you have to engage people adjusting their unrealistic expectations, rather than try to satisfy them as if the situation were amenable primarily to a technical remedy. You have to counteract their exaggerated dependency and promote their resourcefulness. This takes an extraordinary level of presence, time, and artful communication ...<sup>191</sup>

Scott Cormode characterizes the more traditional use of authority as structural authority which relies on structural resources in order to be effective. Structural resources include such things as hierarchical systems, laws (or by-laws), and material resources. Structural power is the power to compel and structural authority is “delineated and unambiguous.”<sup>192</sup> A typical response to the question “Why are we changing this?” from a person rooted in structural understandings of power and authority might be something like, “Because I said so!” or “Because I’m the Pastor, that’s why!” In my opinion, it is very rare that pastoral authority needs to rely primarily on structural resources and their coercive use of power. Rather, pastoral authority more appropriately draws on cultural authority and cultural resources. Cormode describes cultural resources as resources that must be interpreted by a leader who helps make meaning of them.

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<sup>190</sup> It is important to note that traditionally patriarchal ways of exercising power are employed and perpetuated by all types of people in a culture that is hetero-patriarchally normative, including people of all genders.

<sup>191</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, 15.

<sup>192</sup> Scott Cormode, *Making Spiritual Sense: Christian Leaders as Spiritual Interpreters*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 67.





Cultural resources include symbols, stories, signs, and other building blocks that construct meaning and “ground the congregation in its own idiom.”<sup>193</sup> Leaders exercising cultural authority serve an interpretive function, in part, because “cultural resources cannot be unambiguously accumulated” and “are more ethereal than structural resources.”<sup>194</sup> Whereas structural resources often use compelling and coercive power, cultural resources generally rely on persuasive power. Cultural authority is not given because hierarchical structures assign and demand it, but rather because it is freely given by those who recognize it.<sup>195</sup> Cultural authority is persuasive and rhetorical. Pastors who use this type of authority have an opportunity to inspire their congregations to change and grow, but not force them. According to Cormode, this is a more appropriate type of pastoral authority, and relying on such cultural resources allows pastors to exercise a fundamentally different type of leadership than the top-down model common in our society at large and, perhaps in particular, in the corporate world of business.<sup>196</sup>

Collaborative leadership characterized by the use of power *with* and not *over* others also requires leaders to develop skills at being leader-participants. In other words, pastors need to find ways that they can *both* be a part of the group working on change together *and* offer the types of leadership that congregations expect and need from them. Heifetz and Linsky use the metaphors of dance floors and balconies in order to describe this art.

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 69.



Let's say you are dancing in a big ballroom with a balcony up above. A band plays and people swirl all around you to the music, filling up your view. Most of your attention focuses on your dance partner, and you reserve whatever is left to make sure that you don't collide with dancers close by. You let yourself get carried away by the music, your partner, and the moment.... But if you had gone up to the balcony and looked down on the dance floor, you might have seen a very different picture. You would have noticed all sorts of patterns. For example, you might have observed that when slow music played, only some people danced; when the tempo increased, others stepped onto the floor; and some people never seemed to dance at all.... Achieving a balcony perspective means taking yourself out of the dance, in your mind, even if only for a moment. The only way you can gain both a clearer view of reality and some perspective on the bigger picture is by distancing yourself from the fray.... [And,] if you want to affect what is happening, you have to return to the dance floor. Staying on the balcony in a safe observer role is as much a prescription for ineffectuality as never achieving that perspective in the first place.<sup>197</sup>

This is an important skill for pastors to develop, being able to be both a collaborative participant and a leader-observer. This is also a concept deeply rooted in some of the core values of queer theology (e.g., mutuality, fluidity, etc.) that we are seeking to integrate into congregational praxis. For this reason, it is all the more important for pastors to learn and model this practice.

Cormode argues that one of the primary responsibilities of spiritual leaders is to help communities interpret and construct meaning. As his book title suggests, this act of “making spiritual sense” draws on cultural resources and engages the community in reflecting on its own core values and experiences in order to understand the dynamics of change and navigate desired change successfully. To explore one of the potential ways of doing this, let's return to the practice of giving the work back to the people, described by Heifetz and Linsky. As I mentioned earlier, pastors can rarely (if ever) effectively

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<sup>197</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, 53.



manage adaptive change by rendering decisions from on high; rather, they must work more mutually and collaboratively with the congregation. This involves giving the work back to those who must take responsibility for it and reinterpreting it as a joint endeavor and a shared opportunity for growth. Several strategies can facilitate this process as well as help construct the type of meaning that will advance the change process. Perhaps most importantly, the pastor has the opportunity to make some observations, simple “statements that reflect back to people their behavior or attempt to describe current conditions.”<sup>198</sup> For example, opportunities to make observations about an apparent lack of alignment between core values and enacted behavior often present themselves in MCC. It can sometimes be helpful for leaders to draw the group’s attention to the gaps that exist between what we have articulated as our goal or vision and how we are actually behaving in a given situation, or, in other words, gaps between our theological beliefs and our lived praxis. Some examples of this strategy were explored in the previous chapter. It is also true that these observations are not always welcome. There are times, however, when they are precisely what is needed. Because leaders exercising this strategy are not doing so from *above*, from a position of structural authority, but rather *with*, from a position of having been granted cultural authority, there are ways to make this type of difficult observation effectively. Two possible approaches may be helpful: asking questions and offering interpretations.<sup>199</sup> Asking questions invites the group itself to evaluate and interpret the situation together; it presents an opportunity for people to describe

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 136-7.





themselves and articulate for themselves both the reality and the presenting challenges. If the group seems reluctant or is unable to do this, offering tentative interpretations and inviting the group to respond can advance the conversation and analysis.

The construction of meaning, which is an important aspect of leading congregational change, is about more than only analyzing and describing the current situation or deconstructing behaviors, attitudes, or structures that may be problematic. One must also help the congregation construct new behaviors, attitudes, and structures that more accurately reflect their aspirations. For example, Cormode argues that leaders cannot discredit old behaviors, ideas, values, etc. “without creating a new way of being to replace it.”<sup>200</sup> This has particular implications for MCC in terms of how we integrate the core values of queer theology into our congregational praxis. In my observation, there are many existing instances in which this has not occurred successfully. Many congregations have done excellent work at deconstructing, discrediting, and delegitimizing exclusive, homophobic, and erotophobic theologies and church structures. We have identified some definite problems, theoretically and practically. However, many in our churches fall back on old body-denying and erotophobic thoughts and behaviors in times of crisis or overwhelming change. This is likely because we have not yet done a very good job of reconstructing useful and effective ways of integrating sexuality and spirituality. Even though we have articulated the latter as one of our primary missions, we still have work to do to create congregational cultures that consistently practice creative ways of doing this together. We would also do well to note

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<sup>200</sup> Cormode, xvii.



that *how* we engage people on this task of reconstruction is as important as the *content* or *character* of the new structures we co-create together.

There is one additional aspect of leading change specifically in queer communities that it seems necessary to explore. Because queer churches intentionally attend to some of the more uncomfortable dynamics of change — including the presence of ambiguity, the discomfort of marginality, and the deconstruction of deeply ingrained patterns of belief and behavior reinforced by dominant culture — leaders need to be attentive to the feelings of loss and disorientation people are having. I sometimes refer to this function of pastoral leadership in queer churches as being a “chaplain of the gaps.” What I mean by this is that often pastors of MCC congregations are called upon to simply be present with people in the margins or to companion people through the ambiguity they experience when previously presumed stable, fixed, or impermeable identities or boundaries are queered/transgressed. Until there is a new equilibrium established, people and the community as a whole have to learn how to live in a state or through stages of liminality.<sup>201</sup> Understanding the feelings of fear, anger, loss, and anxiety that are common in this stage, leaders might seek to develop certain relational skills whereby they help attend to those feelings. By providing a non-anxious presence, pastors can absorb some of the anxiety and help individuals and groups more comfortably acknowledge and work with/through the feelings of fear and loss. It is also incumbent upon leaders to both recognize and use the incredible creative potential of liminality for congregational

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<sup>201</sup> See pages 77-81 for a more complete description, in which I have argued that liminality is a constant feature of queer church. As soon as a new equilibrium is established in the sense of having a new stable identity or norm, which we know from experience eventually marginalizes others, we must then seek to deconstruct the new norm in the greater cause of creating even more inclusive communities.



development. One of ways of tapping into this potential is to understand and take advantage of the special camaraderie that can develop between people sharing this experience. Leaders who are able to identify, call attention to, and nurture this naturally emerging egalitarian way of relating can help queer communities draw upon it strategically as a queer cultural resource.

One practical strategy for this involves the art of helping promote and strengthen individual relationships. The bonds of connection people naturally experience in times of liminality can also be intentionally created by leaders who draw attention to points of connection that might otherwise be overlooked. Joyce Fletcher discusses a practice of “translating” people for others as one way of working towards this.<sup>202</sup> If two dissimilar members of a group are describing an experience that they do not realize is shared, or worse, that they have judged negatively for the other person, the leader can make observations about the similarities or points of commonality. They may also recast one person’s experiences in light of the other person’s experience in order to draw parallels that may not have been originally noticed. In a similar strategy, when leaders realize that certain people in a group are being dismissed, they may help “translate” their opinions or experience to others so that they do not dismiss the content. This has the dual effect of building connections and, if it happens in the group context, of providing additional language and communication skills for those whose words may have been misunderstood or disregarded or “disappeared”<sup>203</sup> because of negative prejudice based on a personal

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<sup>202</sup> Joyce K. Fletcher, *Disappearing Acts: Gender, Power and Relational Practice at Work*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 52.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.





characteristic. As spiritual leaders in MCC become conversant with the complex intersection of oppressions, this can be an incredible relational tool for helping bridge different segments of a diverse community. Because deconstructing normative privilege is a queer activity and because this becomes most difficult when we understand and honor the complex nature of privilege that forms at the intersection of oppressions, this may be one of the most important skills for leaders to develop. If leaders can help the community recognize the similar and dissimilar ways in which different segments of minority communities experience injustice and oppression, as well as the ways we ourselves oppress and exclude others, we can then begin to deconstruct the privileges built upon these oppressions. Once we begin to deconstruct the normative privileges without simply trying to gain access to the privileges for ourselves, we will make significant progress on our journey to becoming authentic queer communities.<sup>204</sup>

Relational practices, like those described briefly above, are incredibly compatible with pastoral leadership that relies on cultural authority. These practices may be among the best resources for leading adaptive change in queer congregations.

### The Pastoral Art of Improvisation

Although I have described some examples of the dynamics of adaptive change in MCC, as well as some of the types of skills and strategies leaders may employ to help lead change successfully, I am also very aware that based on the nature of adaptive

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<sup>204</sup> I am indebted to Kelly Brown Douglas, Carter Heyward, Robert Goss, and Mark Jordan for their panel discussion at a recent conference called *Queering Church* at the Boston University School of Theology (April 17-19, 2007), after which I came to understand more clearly just how important this qualifying sentence “without simply trying to gain access to the privileges for ourselves” is for queer communities.



change and the nature of queer communities in constant transition, leading change in MCC congregations will always be an improvisational art. In order to improvise well, leaders must try to understand the complexities of what is happening in the community, in individual members of it, and in themselves. I have argued that one of the fundamental changes queer churches want to make is to become inclusive communities. It is important to realize that the prejudices we have to confront and resist do not only exist “out there” in the broader church and world, they also exist “in here” in our hearts and in our congregations. Quite understandably, this means that we will sustain some pain as we go about our work of becoming queer churches. This is where our experience as pastors can help us. We know what it is like to be present with people who are hurting, people who are dying, people who are grieving. We know how to be a non-anxious presence with people and how to live with them into the unknown and unpredictable. We would do well not to compartmentalize these skills as ways only of providing pastoral care, but also as cultural and relational resources for leading change and queering the church.

Finally, it is also worthy of note that while leading change in queer spiritual communities can be an incredibly exciting activity, it can also be exhausting. It is imperative that pastors and other leaders are attentive to their own needs for spiritual nurture and support, for friendships outside of the church, for balance, beauty, sex, laughter, rest, and all of the other things that inspire and sustain our creativity and work. Like the core values of queer churches, this is also a statement that is aspirational in nature. It is my hope that keeping our goals ever before us may remind us where we



hope to be heading, and evoke our gratitude for the moments in which we glimpse ourselves and our churches actually moving in the right direction.





## CONCLUSION

One of the challenges I experience in having a conversation like this about what it means to queer the church and how we might most effectively go about doing so in MCC is the constant need to stretch to maintain optimum connection. For example, in this thesis I began with a task I wish was unnecessary — i.e., defining the word *queer* — because, no matter how much I wish it were otherwise, establishing a common vocabulary is a necessary prerequisite for allowing the greatest number of people possible to take part in the conversation. If this definitional work was unnecessary and a shared understanding of the meaning and potential of “queer” were a given, obviously the conversation could be advanced much further. However, since this is not the case, we must stretch backwards in order to invite and encourage others to journey with us even as we stretch forward to avoid being left behind as the conversation progresses. This is one explanation for the troublesome gap that seems always to exist between the academy (where prerequisites can be required) and the church, a gap I believe pastors are called to bridge. Another example of this stretching exercise that is more practically related to my experience of ministry in MCC has to do with the simultaneous need we have to provide triage for the constant stream of people that trickle into our churches deeply wounded by homophobic church and society, and those who have had sufficient time for healing and are eager to explore the more radical aspects of queer spirituality. For example, it is difficult in one congregation to have a deeply meaningful conversation about the ethics of polyamory or the queer nature of Christ when some of the participants in that conversation are still struggling with the question “Can I be both gay and Christian?” or



“Does God really love me?” Yet, this is the task before us, characterized by both challenge and opportunity.

I am convinced that pastors and other spiritual leaders in MCC can help congregations more broadly and thoroughly integrate the insights and core values of queer theology into congregational life. It will require of us a courageous commitment to being intentional about analyzing the ways we are actually living as the church and critiquing the ways in which our practices do not reflect our core values or best desires. The things we have learned about healing the toxic divide between spirituality and sexuality and body and soul are not lessons limited in their application to matters of sex and gender. The skills we have developed that permit us to deconstruct hetero-patriarchal privilege are skills desperately needed to deconstruct the other normative privileges (including those that benefit us) that perpetuate injustice, as well as the complex intersection of oppressions in which we all find ourselves living. The insights we have gained about the sacred value of transgressing rigidity and exposing the inadequacy of binarisms are insights desperately needed in a world plagued by so many wars and divisions. MCC has some unique contributions to make to the world, and our grassroots history of living and breathing and deconstructing and constructing and reconstructing queer theology may be one of the greatest. My earnest hope is that we will claim this as a calling and be as relentless as we are resourceful in living it faithfully.



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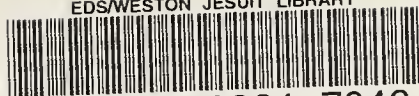
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